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Strategic intent: The literature, the construct and its role in predicting organization performance

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Abstract

Strong performing companies often have intents that state their ambitions for the future and this will be clearly communicated to stakeholders by the chief executive officer. The chief executive officer should lead company strategy and play the key role in establishing and communicating the strategic intent. This conceptual paper uses insights mainly from the strategy process and corporate governance literature to build better understanding of how a business can achieve a strong sense of strategic intent to inform their strategy work. Three dimensions of the strategic intent construct are identified – shared vision, resource focus and foresight. Through the development of a series of research propositions a substantial future research agenda is offered in an area where the literature is quite limited. Points of interest to the strategy practice field are also discussed.

Keywords: strategy formulation and implementation, corporate governance, organizational performance, theoretical perspectives, resource-based view

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INTRODUCTION

The strategic intent construct is one of the more interesting and topical developments in strategy vocabulary and theory development in the past 25 years. The term strategic intent emerged from the influential writing of Hamel and Prahalad (1989) in the executive management literature and was then taken up later as a matter of interest in the academic literature (e.g., Lovas & Ghoshal, 2000; Mantere & Sillince, 2007). Around this time in the 1980s and 1990s the limitations of strategic planning had become apparent for companies seeking better performance, especially in uncertain business conditions (Mintzberg, 1994; Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, & Lampel, 1998; Jarzabkowski & Kaplan, 2015). Planning had failed corporations dramatically and often (Mintzberg, 1994). Developing strategic intent in an organization is a solution to this problem given the limitations of planning in delivering performance outcomes (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989; Lovas & Ghoshal, 2000).

So what is strategic intent? The strategic intent construct is related to the vision or symbolic mode of strategy making (Hart & Banbury, 1994; Fitzroy, Hulbert, & Ghobandian, 2012). There is an important place for the study of symbolism in strategic management research (Smircich & Stubbart, 1985; Suchman, 1995; Galvin & Arndt, 2014). Creating and maintaining shared meaning in the organization helps to enable organized action (Smircich & Stubbart, 1985), give legitimacy to leaders, direct firm resources (Noda & Bower, 1996), as well as focus and reassure organization members

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(Green, 1988; Strati, 1998). Hamel and Prahalad (1989) eloquently explain that strategic intent is more than simply a statement of vision or future direction. Strategic intent is also much more than a simple statement of company goals (Mantere & Sillince, 2007). Hamel and Prahalad (1989) emphasize that strategic intent is future focused on 'winning', sets organization goals that deserve employee commitment and effort, is creative in getting access to resources, is an active management process and has stability over time. Hamel and Prahalad (1989: 65) note that this stability over time serves to increase the attention span of the firm giving 'consistency to short-term action, while leaving room for reinterpretation as new opportunities emerge' over the longer term. Hamel and Prahalad (1989: 63) are suggesting that strategic intent is something more than a single-dimension construct when they indicate 'we need a whole new model of strategy'.

Strategic intent is associated with Eastern management practices and the 'soft', generative, intuitive aspects of strategy development (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989) in contrast to the traditional Western, rational planning and positioning approaches explained by experts such as Andrews (1965), Ansoff (1965) and Porter (1980). The chief executive officer (CEO) is the key strategy executive, leading and usually including the top management team (TMT) in working out and articulating the strategic intent for the organization (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989; O'Shannassy, 2010; Luo, Kanuri, & Andrews, 2014). This statement of strategic intent gives symbolic guidance to workers at all levels of the organization to work together effectively over time through the uncertainties the business environment presents (Jarzabkowski & Kaplan, 2015).

Quality academic discourse in this area by strategy process researchers is limited. There has been some recent interest in this construct from the newer strategy practice branch of the strategic management field established in the 2000s (Mantere & Sillince, 2007). Strategy practice researchers are interested in the sociology of strategy work – the influences, the relationships and power of managers that invites investigation of surprises, the neglected and anomalies (Mantere & Sillince, 2007; Whittington, 2007). Academic discourse in this area by strategy practice researchers can but does not always conform or agree with the views of Hamel and Prahalad (1989), which were presented with an executive management audience in mind. Hamel and Prahalad (1989) communicated a new way of conceiving and executing strategy in organizations with executives and managers working together in a sustained, integrated effort to achieve competitive advantage and better firm performance. Exploring surprises and anomalies through a strategy practice lens can lead to some uncomfortable considerations for those with an executive management mindset. Challenging strategy practice issues here include the difficulties of diffusing a single strategic intent through the organization, the possibility of the presence of multiple intents and/or fragmentation of intent into strategies that are not connected for the organization (Mantere & Sillince, 2007).

Research rigour on the strategic intent construct has scope for further development. For instance there is some confusion in the literature on who has strategic intent in organizations (Mantere & Sillince, 2007). There are a limited number of theoretical and empirical studies with the sole focus of examining and discussing what this term means with depth, how it might be measured with a survey scale, perhaps undertaking qualitative interviews with upper echelon executives and company directors to specifically understand its practice, or preparing rigorous case studies to demonstrate its effective use (Lovas & Ghoshal, 2000; Mantere & Sillince, 2007). Improvement in understanding of strategic intent will add to the impact of strategy process and strategy practice research (Ansoff, 1987; Bower, 1996; Lovas & Ghoshal, 2000; Floyd, Cornelissen, Wright, & Delios, 2011; Galvin & Arndt, 2014).

The theoretical contribution provided in this paper is new in that it brings together insight mainly from the strategy process literature and the corporate governance literature to improve knowledge of strategic intent and the contingencies that influence the development of a strong orientation to and sense of strategic intent for an organization (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989; Johnson, Daily, & Ellstrand, 1996; Dess, Lumpkin, & Covin, 1997; Priem & Butler, 2001; Whittington, 2007; Galvin & Arndt, 2014). The paper also needs to succinctly draw on certain threads of insight from the strategy practice literature to help develop the research propositions (Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008; Kaplan, 2008; Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013).

The preceding discussion indicates there is much to be explored in a theoretical paper on strategic intent. To clarify, the purpose of this paper is to address the following research questions: How is strategic intent defined? What are the elements of the strategic intent construct? What research propositions can be developed that can guide researchers and practitioners to better understanding of the use of strategic intent in organizations?

In terms of roadmap, next the paper develops the theoretical background on strategic intent which helps to inform development of a series of research propositions. This is followed by a discussion of the contribution to theory, the contribution to practice, limitations, a substantial future research agenda and conclusion.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH PROPOSITIONS

Theoretical background

The strategy field has a long and rich past and many writers over the years have discussed the importance of organizations having an element of mission, vision, intent or symbolism in their strategy development to guide internal and external stakeholders on the future direction of the organization (Green, 1988; Prahalad & Hamel, 1990; Hart, 1992; Hart & Banbury, 1994; Mintzberg, 1994; Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, & Lampel, 1998). These writers emphasize the importance of the firm having a shared ideology, intentions and beliefs to guide internal stakeholders (e.g., company directors, top managers, middle managers) and external stakeholders (e.g., suppliers, bankers, government bodies, industry groupings) on this collective vision of the future (Green, 1988; Strati, 1998; Lovas & Ghoshal, 2000; Goldman, 2012). This shared, collective vision provides a convincing motivation and focus for internal and external stakeholders as they go about their work over the long term, especially in uncertain business environments where formality and fixed rules are less effective (Ginsberg, 1988; Green, 1988; Liedtka, 1998; Lovas & Ghoshal, 2000).

Environmental uncertainty is an important construct in strategy process research (Hutzchenreuter & Kleindienst, 2006). Environmental uncertainty occurs when company directors, executives and managers individually or as a group are unable to understand or comprehend trends in the business environment external to the firm (Smircich & Stubbart, 1985; Milliken, 1987; Kolodinsky & Bierly, 2013). This uncertainty can be in relation to the business environment as a whole, or in relation to particular elements of the environment such as competitors, customers, the regulatory environment, technology and/or the supply of finance. The company director, executive or manager may also experience a lack of understanding of relationships among the elements of the environment. This perceived environmental uncertainty can be due to lack of information and/or an inability to process available information including choosing between relevant and irrelevant information (Milliken, 1987; Buchko, 1994).

Hamel and Prahalad (1989: 64) leveraged insight from prior research studies, their own research, trends in strategy process in the business community and the success at that time of Japanese business to inform their definition of strategic intent:

> Companies that have risen to global leadership … invariably began with ambitions that were way out of proportion to their resources and capabilities … they created an obsession with winning at all levels of the organization and then sustained that obsession over the 10–20 year quest for global leadership … strategic intent envisions … strategic intent is more than unfettered ambition.

It is this obsession that Hamel and Prahalad (1989) emphasize as key to their definition of strategic intent in their message to a management audience. Hamel and Prahalad (1989) argued that organizations needed a greater orientation to strategic intent and a lesser orientation to strategic planning to perform better. Hamel and Prahalad (1989) note that strategic planning as a dimension of strategy development is quite limiting when the organization objective is an obsession with winning and/or global leadership as it is very difficult to precisely detail how to win and/or achieve global leadership. Strategic intent accommodates the rational and the orthodox as well as the creative and unorthodox approaches to strategy; this gives scope for the CEO and top managers in an organization to 'Let chaos reign, then reign in chaos – repeatedly' as Burgelman and Grove (2007: 965) describe. These insights provide more evidence to support the view that strategic intent is a multidimensional construct.

Hamel and Prahalad's (1989) insights on strategic intent were influenced in the 1980s by an increasing interest in the Western business community in the 'invisible', 'soft' management practices of successful Japanese companies including Honda, Canon and Komatsu (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989; Prahalad & Hamel, 1990). Certain insights from Eastern management practices influenced and helped to inform their writing. One key insight was the Eastern management emphasis on the development and leveraging of resources consistently to reach difficult goals and objectives over the long term – the emphasis here being a long-term focus not a short, fast episode (Lovas & Ghoshal, 2000). Other relevant Eastern management insights were a commitment to organizational learning to beat rival firms, seeking to change industry rules to reduce a rivals competitive advantage, having a well-balanced portfolio of activities, investment in competencies over time and encouraging employees to determine themselves how to achieve challenging performance targets (Prahalad & Hamel, 1990; Lovas & Ghoshal, 2000; Goldman, 2012). This theoretical background and appraisal of Hamel and Prahalad's (1989) writing helps to inform the development of the research propositions that follow.

Use of the term strength in relation to strategy-making process capability is well used and relates to the quality, flexibility, fast cycle capability, durability and robustness of strategy resources the organization develops (Hart & Banbury, 1994; Dess, Lumpkin, & Covin, 1997). Strength in the practice of strategic intent for an organization is an important dynamic capability. Teece, Pisano, and Shuen (1997: 516) define a dynamic capability as 'the firm's ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competences to address rapidly changing environments'. A company can develop strategic intent as a core competency and therefore an important firm resource so there is a connection between strategic intent and the resource-based view of the firm (Prahalad & Hamel, 1990; Lovas & Ghoshal, 2000; Bonn, 2001; Galbreath, 2005).

The resource-based view of the firm itself has been criticized in a number of ways (O'Shannassy, 2005). For instance there is a lack of contingency theories for prescriptions of application for the resource-based view. There is a lack of specifics on the contextual boundaries of firm resources. There is also a lack of specifics on the 'when, where and how' (Priem & Butler, 2001: 33) firm resources may be useful, with the 'how' issues very much related to the 'process black box in strategy research' (Priem & Butler, 2001: 33). It follows that these criticisms can apply to the strategic intent construct as well. Critiques of the strategic intent construct identify the imprecise definition of certain key words and phrases (e.g., 'obsession with winning', 'active management process', Hamel & Prahalad, 1989: 64) which are often used in different ways by different organizations as an area needing further academic thought and attention. Critiques of strategic intent from a strategy practice point of view also draw attention to the possibility of heterogeneity of organizational goals and the difficulty of moulding and shaping intent over time in such an environment (Mantere & Sillince, 2007). However, from an executive management perspective it is suggested here that the circumstances of heterogeneity of organizational goals could arise where there is a shortcoming in the statement of strategic intent and/or the daily management of the organization on the delivery of that intent and the disciplines associated with that work.

Table 1 below provides a summary of representative studies of strategic intent and/or symbolism in strategy research since the 1970s. In depth empirical coverage of the strategic intent construct as seen

TABLE 1. REPRESENTATIVE STUDIES – STRATEGIC INTENT AND/OR SYMBOLISM IN STRATEGY THEORY AND RESEARCH

Author	*Year*	*Focus*	*Method*	*Conclusions*
Smircich and Stubbart	1985	Three implications of the enacted environment	Theoretical	Creating and maintaining shared meaning in the organization helps to enable organized action. The symbolic base of organizational life is important. The language used by organization members can powerfully shape employee actions
Green	1988	Strategy, organizational culture and symbolism	Theoretical	Symbols can give employees focus and direction, influencing their interpretation of the past, present and future. The CEO and top managers play a key role in the symbolic aspects of strategy
Hamel and Prahalad	1989	Strategic intent	Theoretical	Strategic intent is future focused on 'winning', sets long-term goals, is creative in getting access to resources, and is an active management process. Organizations need a greater focus on strategic intent and a lesser focus on strategic planning to perform better
Prahalad and Hamel	1990	Core competence	Theoretical	A firm can develop strategic intent as a core competency, and therefore an important firm resource
Hart	1992	Strategy-making process	Theoretical	Strategic intent is an important focus for organization members. Strategic intent should be emotionally appealing and has much symbolism
Hamel and Prahalad	1994	Competing for the future	Literature study	'Strategic intent … conveys … a sense of direction … sense of discovery … it implies a sense of destiny' (129)
Hart and Banbury	1994	Strategy-making process	Questionnaire	Strategy-making processes including symbolism are significant predictors of performance. Symbolism should inspire organization members
Mintzberg	1994	Strategy making	Literature study	Vision has an important role in strategy making
Burgelman	1994	Strategic business exit	Case study	Strategic intent is informed by the CEO's superior foresight
Suchman	1995	Managing legitimacy	Theoretical	Legitimacy is an anchor or mooring for the firm. Organizations have porous and problematic boundaries. Symbols, beliefs, cultural norms and rituals can empower or constrain organization members
Noda and Bower	1996	Strategy making	Two case studies	Top managers use strategic intent to focus firm resources
Strati	1998	Organizational symbolism	Theoretical	The theoretical basis for organizational symbolism comes from concepts of symbol and myth in ancient Greek mythology and philosophy. Myth on the one hand includes fiction and fable, on the other hand the exemplary model or original, founding revelation. Symbolism can play a role in improving work and results, giving reassurance to organization members, and legitimacy and strength to the leaders
Liedtka	1998	Strategic thinking	Theoretical	Strategic thinking is focused by strategic intent
Lovas and Ghoshal	2000	Strategy as guided evolution	Case study	Strategic intent relates to long-term goals for the firm communicated by the TMT
Burgelman	2002	Strategy as vector	Case study	There are limitations to the value of the CEO's strategic intent in guiding firm evolution
Watson	2003	Ideology and symbolic construction	Qualitative content analysis	Meanings, patterns and values are informed by symbolism. This symbolism can be constructed in organizations. This symbolism can motivate organizational action and inform its evaluation

(*Continued*)

Author	*Year*	*Focus*	*Method*	*Conclusions*
Mantere and Sillince	2007	Strategic intent	Literature study	'Strategic intent represents a proactive mode in strategizing, a symbol of the organization's will about the future, which energizes all organizational levels for a collective purpose' (407)
Rui and Yip	2008	Strategic intent	Case studies	Strategic intent is the relentless pursuit of long-term objectives, a source of motivation, and an active and rational process to focus resources
Kaplan	2008	Framing contests in strategy making	Case study	Strategy making is a dynamic, political process. Framing contests are more than top managers attending their symbolic role. All strategy actors are potential creators and users of frames to resolve strategy challenges
Kaplan and Orlikowski	2013	Temporal work in strategy making	Case studies	Temporal work in strategy making helps strategists understand the past, present and future better and avoid competency traps from the past, especially in uncertain business conditions. This helps to focus resources to deliver favourable future results

in Lovas and Ghoshal (2000) and Rui and Yip (2008) is rare. The emphasis in certain of these studies in Table 1 has been broader than a vision or symbolic element only, though many of these studies (e.g., Hart, 1992; Hart & Banbury, 1994) do include a vision or symbolic element among other elements. Several articles in Table 1 are theoretical only (e.g., Hamel & Prahalad, 1989; Liedtka, 1998). Examples of multidimensional typologies include Mintzberg (1994) with vision, learning and planning elements; Hart (1992) and Hart and Banbury (1994) included command, symbolic, generative, transactive and rational elements of strategy-making processes.

Hamel and Prahalad (1989) do spread a number of remarks about strategic intent through their article, however, we can see above that the specific definition provided there is quite brief. Building on insights from Hamel and Prahalad (1989) strategic intent is defined here as an invisible, 'soft', active management practice that envisions a desired leadership position for the firm. Strategic intent makes a clear statement of ambition and future leadership that communicates a winning position in an industry, marketplace or region to internal and external stakeholders. Strategic intent gives insight into the shared ideology, intentions, beliefs and commitment to learning of the organization (Green, 1988). Strategic intent is a dynamic capability that gives a direct intuitive understanding of the future direction of the organization that helps employees to focus their efforts on achieving firm goals and objectives when confronted by uncertainty (Teece, Pisano, & Shuen, 1997; Liedtka, 1998). This direct intuitive understanding helps the organization when decision making is decentralized and more autonomy and responsibility is given to middle managers to discover desirable outcomes (Liedtka, 1998). In this way strategic intent informs a creative tension for employees in formulating and implementing strategy choices that deliver on ambition (Liedtka, 1998). This strategic intent informs consistency of resource allocation at different levels of the organization and in different business units while the organization pursues these ambitions over time (Lovas & Ghoshal, 2000).

Synthesis of insight from the literature summarized in Table 1 indicates three dimensions to the strategic intent construct. Appraisal of the content of key articles indicates frequent mention of shared vision (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989, 1994; Hart, 1992; Lovas & Ghoshal, 2000; Mantere & Sillince, 2007), an active means of resource allocation (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989, 1994; Noda & Bower, 1996; Mantere & Sillince, 2007) and the need for foresight or an ability to predict the future (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989; Burgelman, 1994; Mantere & Sillince, 2007). This background informs the proposed dimensions of the strategic intent construct here. Strategic intent requires a *shared vision* for the future direction of the organization, developed by the CEO and top managers and communicated to organization members. This shared vision will convey a desired leadership position (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989; Lovas & Ghoshal, 2000). Strategic intent gives *resource focus* to the whole organization in an active rational process. Top managers use strategic intent to convey firm direction, firm goals and aid discovery in the allocation of resources. Organization members gain a better understanding of the future direction of the firm and how to prioritize use of resources from this statement of strategic intent (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989; Lovas & Ghoshal, 2000). Finally, *foresight* helps organization members understand the firm, the industry and resource allocation. Use of scenarios helps to inform foresight, giving some understanding of the future (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989; Burgelman, 1994; Courtney, 2001).

It is also evident from appraisal of the content of the literature and Table 1 that the CEO plays a key role in developing, communicating and implementing strategic intent. This literature in Table 1 highlights the importance of the CEO giving a symbolic focus to the organization and providing an example to employees (Burgelman, 2002). Given the important role of the CEO as the key organization strategist and steward it is argued here that there is a connection between corporate governance theory and practice and a firm's strength of orientation to strategic intent (Burgelman, 1994, 2002; Galvin & Arndt, 2014). This is an under researched and not well understood area and an opportunity to build theory (Galvin & Arndt, 2014). Corporate governance is concerned with the relationships and interactions of board members, executives, shareholders and regulatory authorities in managing the corporation for performance (Krause, Semadeni, & Cannella, 2014). The CEO plays a key role in an organization in corporate governance theory and practice. Insight on corporate governance practice draws on a number of theories including agency theory, institutional theory resource dependence theory and stewardship theory (Johnson, Daily, & Ellstrand, 1996; Galvin & Arndt, 2014).

Agency theory argues that company executives are confronted with a principal–agent problem in that they have difficulty balancing their personal interests from the interests of the organization employing them (Boyd, Haynes, & Zona, 2011; Krause, Semadeni, & Cannella, 2014). In institutional theory economic, political, regulatory and social factors (e.g., Australian Stock Exchange, Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, Australian Securities and Investment Commission) provide a favourable environment and an important influence on managing the corporation for performance (Johnson, Daily, & Ellstrand, 1996; Boyd, Haynes, & Zona, 2011). Resource dependence theory evidences an understanding that the resources required by an organization can be owned by other organizations. This has implications for a range of management and corporate governance matters including recruitment, training and retention of executives and company directors, and also selection and hiring of consultants (Hillman, Cannella, & Paetzold, 2000; Boyd, Haynes, & Zona, 2011). In stewardship theory it is argued that executives as stewards of the corporation build useful knowledge, skills and experience over time. These executives will be responsible stewards of the firm, focus their work on pursuing the best interest of the organization, build knowledge, build networks, perform better and as a consequence enjoy longer tenure (O'Shannassy, 2010; Kolodinsky & Bierly, 2013). The good work of a well-trained, knowledgeable, trustworthy and effective CEO as an effective steward of the firm is that he or she will develop and communicate to the company the strategic intent he or she develops (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989; Johnson, Daily, & Ellstrand, 1996; Boyd, Haynes, & Zona, 2011). The CEO who is a good steward will also exhibit favourable behaviours consistent with the strategic intent articulated including the guidance of resource allocation (Johnson, Daily, & Ellstrand, 1996; Lovas & Ghoshal, 2000).

Research propositions

Figure 1 below depicts a moderated meditation set of relationships between the study variables CEO tenure, strategic intent, perceived environmental uncertainty and organization performance (Edwards & Lambert, 2007). A series of research propositions are developed next reflecting the moderated meditation model proposed.

The CEO is the key organization strategist (Burgelman, 1994; Burgelman & Grove, 2007). CEOs with long tenure will benefit in their strategy work from their experience of organization strategy and operations. CEOs who perform well in the job and are good stewards will stay in the job longer, have had more time to ingratiate themselves to the chairperson and the board, build working relationships with other members of the TMT, think through strategic intent, communicate the strategic intent to internal and external stakeholders (especially middle management), and have experience implementing the stated strategic intent (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989; Coles, McWilliams, & Sen, 2001; Pugh & Bourgeois, 2011; Steptoe-Warren, Howat, & Hume, 2011). The ethos of this approach is for the

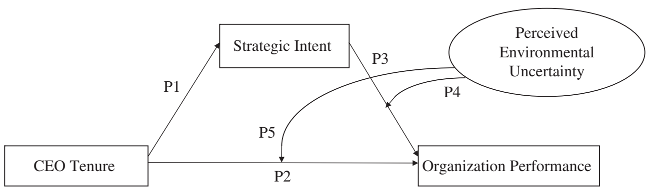

Figure 1. Moderated mediation theoretical model (adapted from Edwards & Lambert, 2007)

CEO to create an environment during their tenure that listens to employees views, the intent inspires employees, brings people together, creates shared commitment, informs resource allocation and enjoyment of strategy work for internal and external stakeholders (e.g., management consultants, legal advisers) with a working relationship with the company (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989). The intent should be crafted in such a way so as to inspire and focus on multiple levels (Mantere & Sillince, 2007). Applying stewardship theory this is how CEOs build and nurture a shared vision, foresight and an understanding of resource allocation requirements – the elements of strategic intent (Lovas & Ghoshal, 2000; Boyd, Haynes, & Zona, 2011). Developing strength in strategic intent orientation is a desirable firm outcome and CEOs play the key role in the development of this dynamic capability. This suggests a positive linear relationship between length of CEO tenure and strategic intent strength. Hence:

Proposition 1: Greater length of CEO tenure predicts strategic intent strength.

The CEO has a central role in strategy development, corporate governance and general management (Krause, Semadeni, & Cannella, 2014). There is a debate in the literature on whether agency theory or stewardship theory is the correct way to view the relationship between CEO tenure and organization performance (Miller, 1991).

Applying agency theory there are seasons to CEO tenure giving a curvilinear or inverted U-shape with organization performance (Simsek, 2007). Initially there is an improvement in organization performance as the new CEO responds to the hiring mandate from the chairperson and the board of directors, undertakes a period of experimentation to find the right strategy, finds an enduring theme for his or her tenure, and then reinforces the enduring theme with a series of incremental decisions on organization management. After a peak in performance there is a performance decline due to CEO boredom, fatigue and/or reduced entrepreneurial motivation and instincts (Miller, 1991). There is some research evidence of this curvilinear relationship, particularly in the United States where there is wide practice of chairperson and CEO duality. However, this research evidence is not conclusive (Coles, McWilliams, & Sen, 2001).

An alternative argument applies stewardship theory (Boyd, Haynes, & Zona, 2011). In stewardship theory CEOs are essentially trustworthy executives with the best interests of the organization informing their work. Where the CEO is an internal appointment or has a strong functional background he or she may have detailed functional knowledge and experience (e.g., marketing, finance, human resources) and a network of internal and/or industry contacts (Krause, Semadeni, & Cannella, 2014). CEOs with long tenure will have the opportunity to commit time and effort to using this knowledge for the benefit of the organization (Johnson, Daily, & Ellstrand, 1996). Applying resource dependence theory the resources required by an organization can be owned by other organizations and a CEO with long tenure will have more time to locate, recruit and/or get access to the human, financial and other resources required to advance the interests of the company (Boyd, Haynes, & Zona, 2011). This results in a positive linear relationship between length of CEO tenure and organization performance (Coles, McWilliams, & Sen, 2001). The research evidence is greater for the linear relationship reflecting stewardship theory, hence:

Proposition 2: The greater the length of CEO tenure the better organization performance.

One of the great traditions of the rich and venerable strategy field is studies of strategy process strength of orientation and organization performance (Hart & Banbury, 1994; Dess, Lumpkin, & Covin, 1997). A study of strategic intent adds further value to this stream of research where there is more to be learned (Bower, 1996). We have seen in the executive management literature that explanation of the strategic intent construct has been informed by Eastern, intuitive, inspirational, people-oriented, 'soft' management practices which are of considerable value to organizations seeking superior performance (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989; O'Shannassy, Kemp, & Booth, 2010). Strategic intent is inspirational at multiple levels of the organization and communicates a desired future state that delivers better organization performance. This is because the long run shared vision informed by foresight guides the rational resource allocation process (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989; Burgelman, 1996). Strategic intent should be crafted in such a way that it inspires and informs strategy work in a positive way and avoids the risk of a 'monolithic trap' restricting the individual talents and creative contribution of employees through the organization (Mantere & Sillince, 2007: 414). Focus in organizations on improving the 'softer' aspects of strategy capability has been recommended in the strategy literature as a solution to the limitations of 'hard', analytical, planning oriented strategy work (Mintzberg, 1994; O'Shannassy, 2010). In this way strategic intent helps the organization and guides the organization members as they push the business forward into the future. Hence:

Proposition 3: Strength in strategic intent predicts better organization performance.

Next, Hamel and Prahalad (1989) mention the value of a crisis to provide impetus and motivation to the organization to pursue strategic intent. The relationship between environmental uncertainty, strategy process constructs and organization performance is a matter of debate in the literature (Yasai-Ardekani & Haug, 1997). Traditionally, environmental uncertainty has had a positive association with strategy process and organization performance in studies including Lindsay and Rue (1980), and Odom and Boxx (1988); this link was communicated and justified most effectively by Mintzberg (1994). This is informed by the view that when companies experience perceived environmental uncertainty strategists need to work together better to process the situation and respond effectively (Calantone & Rubera, 2011).

There is another stream of empirical literature that uses environmental uncertainty as a moderator variable, jointly predicting organization performance with a strategy process or strategy practice variable(s) (e.g., Dess, Lumpkin, & Covin, 1997; Brews and Hunt, 1999; Andersen, 2004). This approach is informed by the logic that it is easier to control processes inside the firm than what is taking place in the business environment outside the firm. So this issue of the research role of environmental uncertainty as an independent variable or as a moderator variable is a matter of some contention in the research literature. For this research here it is argued that perceived environmental uncertainty negatively moderates the influence of strategic intent on organization performance with the two variables acting jointly. Strength of strategic intent is something the organization can develop and nurture over the CEO's tenure as a firm resource. Perceived environmental uncertainty can make this process of strategic intent nurturing and development more difficult, making it more challenging for the CEO leading his or her TMT to deliver organization performance outcomes. This is why:

Proposition 4: Perceived environmental uncertainty will negatively moderate the previously proposed positive relationship between strategic intent and organization performance.

Earlier discussion has established the stewardship theory argument that there is a positive linear relationship between greater CEO tenure and better organization performance and that there is greater research evidence for this relationship than for the alternative agency theory-based curvilinear (i.e., quadratic, inverted U-shape) relationship (Coles, McWilliams, & Sen, 2001). It is also likely that the effect of CEO tenure inside the organization will vary depending on the level of environmental uncertainty outside the organization (Carpenter & Fredrickson, 2001). There are elements of the business environment outside the firm including customer behaviour, competition, supply of finance and technology that have an impact on the ability of the CEO who is a good steward to perform well and lead the organization to better performance (Buchko, 1994; Carpenter & Fredrickson, 2001). So there is a joint multiplicative effect where the influence of the CEO over time is moderated by the level of perceived environmental uncertainty in a negative relationship – high levels of perceived environmental uncertainty make it more difficult for the CEO to deliver better performance over his or her tenure. Given these arguments the hypothesized direct effect between long CEO tenure and better organization performance in Figure 1 is also moderated negatively by perceived environmental uncertainty. Hence:

Proposition 5: Perceived environmental uncertainty will negatively moderate the previously proposed positive relationship between CEO tenure and organization performance.

In summary to prove moderated mediation in this manuscript the tests Propositions 1 to 5 are proposed. First CEO tenure should predict strategic intent. Second CEO tenure should predict organization performance. Third strategic intent should predict organization performance. Fourth strategic intent and perceived environmental uncertainty should jointly predict organization performance in a second stage model of moderation with perceived environmental uncertainty acting negatively (Edwards & Lambert, 2007). Fifth CEO tenure and perceived environmental uncertainty jointly predict organization performance in a direct effect moderation with perceived environmental uncertainty acting negatively. So overall Figure 1 depicts a direct effect and second stage model of moderation.

DISCUSSION

Current understanding of the strategic intent construct is constrained by the small number of theoretical, empirical and executive management articles that properly address the conceptual and research issues discussed here (Lovas & Ghoshal, 2000; Mantere & Sillince, 2007). Strategic intent is an invisible firm resource that takes considerable time, CEO thought and energy working with the TMT to conceive, communicate, nurture and deliver (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989). What is a winning strategic intent for one organization in an industry can have little or no importance for another in the same industry (Newbert, 2008). This relates to the lack of contingency theories for prescriptions of application for the resource-based view, the lack of specifics on the contextual boundaries of firm resources and the lack of specifics on the 'when, where and how' (Priem & Butler, 2001: 33) firm resources may be useful which was referred to earlier. As a consequence there remains a view in the strategic management field that the resource-based view requires further development and insight informed by theory and research and this is a work in progress (Galbreath, 2005; Newbert, 2008).

The core argument here is that the CEO plays a key role in the strong practice of strategic intent, and the effective practice of strategic intent is underpinned by selecting, training and developing the right human resources in the right positions (e.g., top manager, middle manager) over time to support the strategic intent (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989; Mantere & Sillince, 2007). Time is an important component of useful strategy research as firm's build experience, capability and resources (Mosakowski & Earley, 2000). Given the insights from existing theoretical and empirical knowledge that have informed the research propositions here, it is reasonable to expect that the propositions developed here can be proven by empirical research. This is an important aspect of assessing good theory (Whetten, 1989).

This paper makes a theoretical contribution by clarifying the definition of strategic intent, placing understanding of strategic intent in the context of the discussion of the importance the symbolic elements of strategy process, and linking the practice of strong strategic intent to the tenure of the CEO who is a good steward of company resources. Contingencies such as CEO tenure, strategic intent and perceived environmental uncertainty are all logically relevant contingencies that influence organization performance (Galvin & Arndt, 2014). The research propositions here give useful insight into the 'when, where and how' aspects of strategy process (Priem & Butler, 2001: 33). The parsimony of these contingencies is complemented by their comprehensiveness (Whetten, 1989). In addition, the research propositions developed make clear statements on causality that are well grounded in the received literature (Whetten, 1989).

The fact that development of the strategic intent construct has been informed by Eastern, intuitive, inspirational, people-oriented, 'soft' management practices provides direction on the source of criticism of both the resource-based view and of the strategic intent construct for imprecise definition of key words and phrases (Priem & Butler, 2001). We have seen that strategic intent provides a useful source of inspiration that helps guide internal and external stakeholders when making decisions, especially when the business environment is uncertain and there is some ambiguity on the correct course of action. Routines, stories, rituals, significant moments in the organization's history, industry structure and the strength of rivals all help to inform the statement of strategic intent. This is a very grey, 'fuzzy' area of management practice (Bailey, Johnson, & Daniels, 2000; Lovas & Ghoshal, 2000). The strategic intent construct is quite different to traditional competitive strategy research constructs and variables grounded for example in industrial economics which are easier to define and quantify (Porter, 1980). This strategic intent research area is emerging with little quantitative survey research undertaken to inform development of insight into this vocabulary. Survey scale development techniques are very useful for sifting through and prioritizing key words and phrases in a theory, and there is a shortage of this type of strategic intent research so far (Hinkin, 1995, 1998). There is also a shortage of conceptual papers such as this offering on strategic intent to further assist sharpening of understanding of key words and phrases. So while this paper, which has more of an executive management and strategy process orientation than a strategy practice orientation, is a useful step in building better understanding of the strategic intent construct it will not be the final word.

So, an inspirational statement of strategic intent crafted and communicated by the CEO working with the TMT and middle managers – is this inspirational or some 'monolithic trap' (Manter & Sillince, 2007: 414) suffocating individuality as strategy practice researchers suggest? Considering the implications for strategy practice associated with the strategic intent construct helps to answer this question which goes to the centre of the social process of strategizing (Galvin & Arndt, 2014). Strategic intent is a positive management activity with Hamel and Prahalad (1989) emphasizing the positive writing for an executive management audience. Mantere and Sillince (2007) draw on Hart's (1992) command mode to suggest middle managers working as 'sheep' following the leader will not be performing at their best. This is not the essence of the message from Hamel and Prahalad (1989) or Hart (1992) in the strategy process literature. Hart (1992) and later Hart and Banbury (1994) observed the positive value of the symbolic mode of strategy-making process. Both Hamel and Prahalad (1989) and Hart (1992) seek to lift organization performance through the diffusion of strategy insight and capability through the organization. There is need to align corporate goals with employee goals and the corporate goals will be cascaded down to individual employee job descriptions. In this way the unchecked chaos that could emerge from the development of multiple intents and fragmentation of work focus – which has a low probability of being strategic for the organization as a whole and a potential waste of time and resources – is avoided. There *are* moments to allow chaotic management processes to foster innovation and learning, and other moments to reign in the chaos and increase discipline and coordination to deliver organization outcomes; these are key CEO and TMT executive choices and important interventions that can and should be made at the right moments working with the middle management team (Burgelman & Grove, 2007; O'Shannassy, 2011).

On balance, strategic intent should be crafted in such a way to inspire, focus, show the way and leave room to do strategy work effectively at multiple levels. Strategic intent helps to gain the commitment of employees, socially accomplish positive strategy work, focus workplace discussion on matters of strategy detail including resource allocation, inform strategy workshops and even focus the preparation of PowerPoint presentations on strategy matters (Whittington, 2007). Elite executives working with well-trained and disciplined middle managers will achieve these outcomes – an important message in Hamel and Prahalad (1989).

Limitations

A key limitation of this paper is that the insights have been informed by connecting the predominantly Western informed corporate governance literature with Hamel and Prahalad's (1989) insights on strategic intent which are informed by considering deficiencies in Western management practice and the strengths of Eastern management practice. The research propositions here may well hold in an Anglo-American business environment supported by the statutes and courts in the United States, United Kingdom and Australia, but these propositions may not hold in countries such as Japan and mainland China which are different legal jurisdictions and have different business cultures. Context is important here (Whetten, 1989; Bentley, 2015). So there are certain limits on the generalizability of these research propositions including geographic location, business culture, commitment of lawmakers to strong corporate governance practices and legal jurisdiction (Whetten, 1989).

Future research

This paper provides insight into an interesting and potentially fruitful research agenda. The limitations provide guidance on future research opportunities. There is also some discussion at present in the literature on convergence of Anglo-American and Sino corporate governance practices (Yoshikawa & Rasheed, 2009). The research propositions developed here connect corporate governance practices to symbolic management practices, an under researched area of some relevance to the strategic behaviour stream of strategic management research (Ansoff, 1987; Bower, 1996). Examination of the research propositions proposed here with samples of large enterprises, or perhaps small and medium size enterprises in Anglo-American countries and Sino countries may yield interesting results and comparison. There is also scope to examine these research propositions with a series of qualitative interviews or development of specific case studies. This paper sets out a substantial research agenda.

CONCLUSION

Strategic intent is one of the popular 'buzzwords' in management. This paper gives useful theoretical and practical insight into this research construct and how organizations can use strategic intent. The first research question for this paper was to define strategic intent and this has been achieved in the theoretical background. The second research question was to establish the elements of the strategic intent construct. Synthesis of the literature indicates three elements – shared vision, resource focus and foresight (Hamel & Prahalad, 1989; Lovas & Ghoshal, 2000; Courtney, 2001). In relation to the third research question a number of research propositions have been established that indicate a moderated mediation set of relationships between CEO tenure, perceived environmental uncertainty, strategic intent and organization performance (Edwards & Lambert, 2007). The response to the research questions are well grounded in a synthesis of seasoned literature (Whetten, 1989). This is an important area of strategic management research requiring further development (Bower, 1996; Lovas & Ghoshal, 2000; Mantere & Sillince, 2007).

A robust future research agenda has been proposed. There has been limited research publication in this area, providing an opportunity for researchers around the world in different geographic locations to take the research propositions set out here and undertake empirical examination. Better understanding of contingencies that influence the application of the resource-based view of the firm has been identified as a gap in the literature, as has a lack of specifics on the 'when, where and how' firm resources may be useful (Priem & Butler, 2001: 33).

The insight developed here will assist in addressing certain of the criticisms of the resource-based view as it relates to the strategic intent construct, especially imprecise definition of key words and phrases, and the lack of contingency theories related to 'when, where and how' high strategic intent capability can be developed (Priem & Butler, 2001: 33). Better understanding of strategic intent can assist in better understanding dynamic capabilities. All this new knowledge can help companies perform better (Hunter & O'Shannassy, 2007; Galvin & Arndt, 2014).

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