

Mobilizing First-Line Managers as Organizational Strategy Makers: The Case of Environmentally Sustainable Operations

Track 3: Change and Continuity Stability

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Introduction

The purpose of the paper is to investigate how first-line managers are mobilized as organizational strategy makers. The research case is a campaign launched by a Norwegian shipping company servicing the petroleum industry. The strategic idea on which the campaign was based was to operate the company's fleet of offshore service vessels in an environmentally sustainable way, to be realized by carrying out fuel-saving operations on board the vessels. A strategic idea is supposed to set out a view of the future to enhance organizational performance (Hamal and Prahalad, 1989; Macmillian, 2000; Grønhaug, Hellesøy and Kaufmann, 2001; Sapsed; 2009). The case was chosen because of its innovative nature, as well as the shipping company's success in transforming the idea to operate its fleet of vessels in an environmentally sustainable way into practical realities.

Transformation of a strategic idea into practical realities normally implies larger or smaller organizational changes. In the research on strategic organizational change the dominating focus has been on analytical activities related to decision making, implicitly presupposing that the transformation of strategic ideas into realities is more or less a straightforward task (Johnson, Langley, Melin and Whittington, 2007). The focal point has been on strategic analysis and strategy formulation, paying less attention to how formulated strategic ideas or visions are put into effect. More recently implementation of strategic ideas into organizational realities has been understood to be perhaps even more demanding than strategy formulation, as reflected among others in the emerging Strategy as Practice perspective (Whittington, 2006; Jarzabowski, Balugun and Seidl 2007; Johnson, Langley, Melin and Whittington, 2007). In contrast to the traditional view on strategy, Strategy as Practice has a micro-perspective on organizational strategy making, focusing on the doings of strategic actors, or practitioners, in realizing strategic ideas.

The intent of this study is to drill deep into the organizational strategy making processes, or to what Brown and Duguid (2000: 95) term "the internal life of the processes," focusing particularly on how first-line managers as micro-organizational practitioners are mobilized in creating environmentally sustainable operations. Our guiding research question is: *How are first-line managers mobilized as strategy makers in transforming an idea for operating offshore service vessels in an environmentally sustainable way into*

micro-organizational realities? This is an important research question because our present knowledge about transforming a strategic idea into micro-organizational realities is limited, but is reflected in numerous publications confirming the failure of strategic change and implementation processes (e.g., Beer, Eisenstat and Spector, 1990; Kotter, 1996; Grønhaug et al., 2001; Brunsson, 2007; Johnson, Langlely, Melin and Whittington 2007; Whittington, 2011; Hennestad and Revang, 2012; Meyer and Stensaker, 2012). Further knowledge about the implementation of strategic ideas into practical realities is therefore of significant importance for any organization struggling to improve its competitive position, not the least of which are companies operating within the shipping industry subject to strong international competition while at the same time under pressure to operate in environmentally sustainable ways (Norwegian Government Report, 2011-2012; Behring, 2012).

The remaining part of the paper is organized as follows. First I describe the theoretical perspectives regarding organizational strategy making, including first-line managers as micro-organizational actors in the strategy making processes. Thereafter I present the case constituting the empirical basis for the research. Then I describe the methodological approach for exploring the research question, followed by a summary of findings regarding key practices in mobilizing first-line managers as organizational strategy makers. Finally, I discuss and deepen some aspects of the findings, and point to contributions and avenues for further research.

Theoretical Perspectives

This section reports on the theoretical basis of the study: research on organizational strategy making from a practice perspective. In recent years this perspective has been labeled Strategy as Practice (Whittington, 1996). It focuses on the micro-level social activities, processes, and practices that characterize organizational strategy work. By re-conceiving strategy not as something organizations *have* but as something organizations *do*, Strategy as Practice is shifting the focus of analytical attention towards the making of strategy (Whittington, 2006), thus departing from traditional variance-model approaches (Tsoukas and Knudsen 2002). Strategy as Practice as a theoretical perspective embraces an overarching conceptual framework of practitioners, practices, and praxis (Johnson, Langlely, Melin and Whittington, 2007). Practices are defined as cognitive, behavioral, procedural, and physical practices that are combined, coordinated, and adapted in constructing organizational praxis. Praxis is defined as socially accomplished flows of activities that are strategically consequential for the direction of a company (Jarzabokwski et al., 2007). Practitioners, on the other hand, are the actors in the construction of new organizational praxis, through who they are, how they act and interact, and what practices they draw on. The making of strategy comprises the nexus between praxis, practices, and practitioners. In this paper the focus is on strategy practices in mobilizing first-line managers as strategy makers in transforming an idea for operating offshore service vessels in an environmentally sustainable way into micro-organizational praxis.

Strategy making emanates from practical coping, deliberate coping, or strategizing of individual actors, situated in sociomaterial practices (Tsoukas, 2011). In practical coping, the inherited background of sociomaterial practices constitutes the launching pad for non-deliberate actions in response to a practical situation at hand. In deliberate coping, both the inherited background and the explicit awareness of individuals are intertwined in the face of breakdowns. Deliberate strategy making is to make retrospective sense of what has been going on in order to consolidate, further refine, or change a pattern of actions. In strategizing, on the other hand, the organization is an

occurring object that enters the thematic awareness of the participants, and its desituated properties are identified.

Epistemologically the Strategy as Practice perspective is closely linked to a dwelling world-view (Chia and Rasche, 2011) as opposed to a building world-view that has been a dominant view within strategy research. In accordance with a dwelling world-view the individual strategic actors and organizational society are viewed as “mutually constitutive and co-defining impulses relying on complex responsive processes” (Stacey, 2007: 247; Chia and MacKay, 2007), to become who and what they are.

First-Line Managers as Organizational Strategy Makers

Most of the literature on organizational strategy making focuses on the role of top-level management (Stensaker, 2011). In line with the Strategy as Practice perspective, however, the role and activities of micro-organizational actors has emerged as a rich ground for researching organizational strategy making (Whittington, 2010). In additions to top leaders, Caldwell (2003) identifies middle-managers and consultants, as well as teams, as important practitioners or constructs in organizational strategy making. Not in the least, middle-managers have been identified as playing an essential role in strategy making within organizations, particularly when it comes to the implementation phase (Wooldridge and Floyd, 1990; Floyd and Wooldridge, 2000; Ikavalko and Aaltonen, 2001; Balugun 2003; Balugun and Johnson, 2004; Mantere, 2008; Hope 2010). The term middle-manager refers to any manager two levels or more below the CEO (Stensaker, 2011), including first-line managers close to where strategic ideas and decisions are transformed into organizational realities, conventionally taken to denote those positions to whom non-managerial employees report.

Within this broad definition, however, there is controversy about whether “first-line managers” and “supervisors” are co-extensive or distinct (Hales, 2005; Voxted, 2007). Some textbook discussions treat first-line manager, shop-floor manager, team leader, and supervisor as alternative job titles (Bedward, Rexworthy, Blackman, Rothwell and Weaver, 1997), and some recent analyses have argued that modern supervisors should now be considered first-line managers (Betts, 1993; IRRR, 1990). Underlying the focus in this study is the idea that first-line managers as micro-organizational practitioners, whatever title they have, are vital actors in transforming strategic initiatives into organizational praxis, as acknowledged in the Strategy as Practice perspective (Whittington, 2011).

The Case

The case constituting the empirical basis for this research was, as previously stated, a fuel-saving campaign initiated by a Norwegian shipping company serving the offshore petroleum industry. The campaign started in the 4th quarter of 2009, motivated among others things by a tax law allowing shipping companies deductions for reducing environmental emissions. The initial vaguely stated ambition of the campaign was to reduce the total consumption of diesel-fuel used by the company`s fleet of vessels somewhat. After a while, however, the ambition level was raised to a 10-20 % reduction, or up to 20,000 tons (equaling 23,000,000 liters) a year.

The reduction in fuel-consumption was to be achieved by carrying out fuel-saving operations, in this case referred to as “green operations”. A “green operation” was defined as a saving of 500 liters (or 0.5 m³) of diesel-fuel in a specific operational achievement during a day (www.company.no). Seven categories of “green operations” were identified. The seven categories of fuel-saving “green operations” stated various ways in which such operations could be carried out for reducing environmentally damaging emissions. By carrying out fuel-saving operations on board the vessels the company was trying to build a competitive advantage by branding itself as a “green” shipping company in a commercially profitable way.

In 2011 the company extended the campaign by introducing a new environmental concept for the company`s fleet. The concept was named Climate Neutral Operations (CNO), and its intention was to compensate for the fleet`s exhaust emissions as well as to introduce the opportunity for their customers to contract climate-neutral ships (www.company.no/climate-neutral-network). Recently, the shipping company also announced that one of its vessels had been contracted on the basis of the CNO-concept for the next one-and-a-half years, implying that the cost reductions due to less use of diesel-fuel were to be shared equally between the customer contracting the vessel and contributions to the Norwegian Rainforest Foundation.

The shipping company that initiated the campaign was established in the 1960s as a family company and is today owned and controlled by the founder`s family. The company has approximately 1800 employees and a fleet of 50 offshore service vessels altogether, comprising construction service vessels, anchor handling vessels, as well as platform supply vessels. The number of crew-members on board the vessels varies from 20 up to 50 during certain operations, including representatives of the contractor of the vessel.

To manage the fuel-saving campaign a project leader was hired from outside the company and employed as a full-time employee. The project leader reported to the managing director and worked in close cooperation with the top-management of the shipping company, consisting of managers responsible for operations, technical affairs, chartering, and the offshore crews. The management team on board an offshore service vessel includes the captain, the chief mate, the chief engineer, and the steward. In the rest of his paper, these managers on board the vessels are referred to as first-line managers.

Results of the “Green Operations” Campaign

The results of the “green operations” campaign from when it was initiated on the 1st of October 2009 up to and including all of 2012 are shown below. As shown in Table 1, the percentage reductions in diesel consumption compared to before the campaign was launched were 5.6 % for 2009, 10 % for 2010, 19.1 % for 2011, and 25.5 % for 2012. The quarterly average numbers of fuel-saving operations carried out on board the fleet of vessels for the same years were 922, 1,638, 3,390, and 4,531, respectively.

A reduction of 25.5 % of the total amount of diesel-fuel achieved in 2012 equals emissions from between 450,000 and 500,000 cars a year. The rainforest area that might be preserved as a result of the 25.5 % reduction in diesel-fuel carried out is 16,768 m², an area equal to the size of almost 2,700 football fields.

Average per quarter	4 th quarter of 2009	Quarterly average for 2010	Quarterly average for 2011	Quarterly average for 2012
Number of fuel-saving operations	922	1,638	3,390	4,531
Fuel-savings (m ³)	2,600	4,619	8,846	11,822
Fuel-savings in %	5.6	10	19.1	25.5

Table 1. Results of the “Green Operations” Campaign.

In addition to the fuel-savings presented above the maintenance costs have also been reduced because of less wear and tear on the engines of the vessels.

Method

An exploratory case-study approach was chosen for capturing how first-line managers on board offshore service vessels were mobilized as strategy makers in transforming the strategic idea to run the fleet of offshore service vessels in an environmentally sustainable way into operative praxis. A case-study approach in this research project refers to a qualitative and field-based method used to construct and analyze empirical findings (Ghauri and Grønhaug, 2010; Andersen, 2012). The main reason for choosing an exploratory case-study approach was to be able to answer the research question, including the lack of knowledge about how first-line managers are mobilized as organizational strategy makers, making it impossible to advance a well-grounded a priori hypothesis. Case-study research is particularly useful when insight about context and process is important for understanding the phenomenon under investigation.

A multiple research design (Yin, 2003; Ghauri and Grønhaug, 2010) consisting of four vessels as observation units was chosen. The four observation units were selected on the basis of the number of fuel-saving operations carried out so far in the campaign, i.e., as per the end of year 2010 when the research process started, where two of the sampled vessels were below average and two vessels on the upper end of the scale at that stage in the campaign. The four observation units were supposed to capture activities and challenges in mobilizing first-line managers as practitioners in making environmentally sustainable micro-organizational praxis. In-depth interviews with onshore

management as well as first-line managers and crews on board the four sampled vessels were chosen for this purpose.

The collection of empirical data was as follows. A first meeting was scheduled with the project leader of the campaign. The purpose of this meeting was to obtain a more general overview of the fuel-saving campaign, as well as to establish a trusting relationship with representatives of the company for obtaining access to the four vessels sampled. Before as well as after this meeting with the project leader a significant amount of secondary data was collected from various sources for obtaining further information about the campaign. This included internal company documents and annual reports, as well as newspapers.

On the basis of the data from the conversation with the project leader as well as information obtained from secondary data sources, a semi-structured interview guide was developed. The interview guide contained questions about the strategic idea to operate the fleet of offshore service vessels in an environmentally sustainable way, about what constituted a typical fuel-saving operation, how the operations were carried out, and about the actors involved in initiating and carrying out fuel-saving operations. Further, the guide included specific questions about how first-line managers were mobilized as organizational strategy makers, including cooperation and interactions with company-internal actors as well as with customers. Furthermore, the interview guide contained questions about how the crews reacted to the campaign, as well as about challenges in enacting fuel-saving operations. Finally, the guide included questions about challenges experienced during the strategy making processes as well as micro-organizational capability requirements for operating offshore service vessels in an environmentally sustainable way.

Appointments for conducting interviews on board the sampled vessels were arranged in cooperation with the project leader for the campaign and scheduled to take place when the vessels were approaching a port that was convenient for the researcher. Because some of the vessels did not often approach adjacent ports, the first interview on board a vessel was conducted early in 2011 and the last one late in the same year. One of the interviews was conducted in the captain's cabin, one on the bridge, and two others in the vessel lounges, as was most convenient for a ship in full operation preparing for the next assignment. The interview in the captain's cabin was with captain himself as the only interviewee, while the interview on the bridge was with the whole management team of the vessel in question, including the captain, the chief mate, the chief engineer, and the steward. Regarding the two other interviews, one was with the captain and the chief mate and the other with just the chief mate.

The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed, in addition to notes taken during the interviews. Regarding the lengths of the interviews, these varied from one to three hours, followed by guided tours around the vessels that also included short conversations with the crews. After the interviews with the management and crews on board the four sampled vessels a final interview lasting for a whole day was conducted with onshore management, reviewing, discussing, and verifying significant findings.

Findings

As the empirical material included several kinds of data, including various secondary data documents and interviews, it provided an extensive interpretative database for examining practices in mobilizing first-line managers as organizational strategy makers in transforming the strategic idea to operate the fleet of offshore service vessels environmentally sustainable into micro-organizational praxis. A summary of findings regarding key practices in mobilizing first-line managers as organizational strategy makers is incorporated in Table 2. Preparatory mobilizing practices (A), practices related to mobilizing implementation of the strategic idea into micro-organizational praxis (B), as well as practices that were related to the entire strategy making processes, from creating and promoting of the strategic idea to realizing new performative praxis (C), are stated.

<p>A. Practices in Preparing the Campaign</p> <p>Mobilizing practice 1: Creating and promoting a strategic idea resonating with prevailing institutional and organizational trends and values regarding environmental sustainability.</p> <p>Mobilizing practice 2: Establishing a repertoire for how to act to transform the strategic idea into practical realities, in cooperation with first-line managers.</p>
<p>B. Mobilizing Practices Related to Implementation of the Strategic Idea into Micro-Organizational Praxis</p> <p>Mobilizing practice 3: Designating and acknowledging first-line managers as key micro-organizational practitioners.</p> <p>Mobilizing practice 4: Organizing the campaign as a competition among the vessels in carrying out the most fuel-saving operations.</p> <p>Mobilizing practice 5: Encouraging first-line managers to enact fuel-saving operations whenever operationally possible, including unfreezing of ostensible operative routines and refreezing of new performative routines.</p>
<p>C. Mobilizing practices throughout the entire strategy making processes</p> <p>Mobilizing practice 6: Corporate leadership of the strategy making processes, including following-up, supporting and facilitating of the strategy making processes on a continuous basis, from the introduction of the strategic idea to the realization of environmentally sustainable micro-organizational praxis.</p>

Table 2. Key Practices in Mobilizing of First-line Managers as Organizational Strategy Makers.

Discussion

The guiding research question was how first-line managers were mobilized as organizational strategy makers in transforming an idea for operating offshore service vessels in an environmentally sustainable way into micro-organizational realities. The initial challenge in mobilizing first-line managers as strategy makers was to create and promote a strategic idea, for which the time was right.

The strategic idea to operate offshore service vessels in an environmentally sustainable way was a vision that resonated with emerging institutional and societal trends and values within the shipping industry (Norwegian Governmental Report, 2011-2012; Behring, 2012). Not in the least, on board the offshore service vessels the idea to operate in an environmentally sustainable way was accepted and supported, particularly by the chief engineers who for years had been calling for operational routines and procedures that contributed to more environmental-friendly operations of the vessels. The strategic idea appealed to environmental sustainability as a driving force more than financial and operational goals (Alvesson, 2011). It was “infused with values beyond the technical requirements of the task at hand” (Selznick, 1957: 17), thus matching an institutional and organizational template regarding environmental sustainability (Whittington 2006).

Transforming the strategic idea to operate the fleet of offshore service vessels environmentally sustainable into operative praxis rested on first-line managers as practitioners in carrying out fuel-saving “green operations”. Turning an abstract strategic idea into an effect is, however, often not realized because micro-organizational actors do not know how to act to convert the idea into practical realities (Beer, Eisenstat and Spector, 1990). In this research case, transforming the strategic idea to operate offshore service vessels in an environmentally sustainable way into practical realities was facilitated by establishing a repertoire, or menu, consisting of seven categories of fuel-saving operations. The repertoire established concretized the idea, and in that way bridged the road between the strategic idea and concrete operative activities and actions to convert the idea into practical realities (Czarniawaska, 2003). As such the repertoire acted as a supportive guideline that mobilized first-line managers on board the offshore service vessels to enact environmentally sustainable micro-organizational praxis.

Designating and acknowledging first-line managers on board the offshore service vessels as key micro-organizational strategy makers was identified as a further vital mobilizing practice. First-line managers were recognized as the crucial practitioners in transforming the strategic idea for operating the fleet of vessels environmentally sustainable into operative praxis, and acknowledged as such within the organizational system. Identifying first-line managers as key practitioners in the organizational strategy making processes is in line with recent research pointing to first and middle-managers as essential actors in transforming strategic ideas into practical realities (Huy, 2001; Ikavalko and Aaltonen, 2001; Balugun, 2003; Caldwell, 2003; Balugun and Hope Hailey, 2008; Mantere, 2008; Hope, 2010; Stensaker, 2011; Whittington, 2011).

Organizing the campaign as an internal competition among the vessels in the fleet constituted a further vital practice in mobilizing first-line managers to enact fuel-saving operations whenever operationally possible. Through the competition first-line managers` responsibility in enacting fuel-saving “green operations” was made visible and reinforced. The internal competition created a social pressure to carry out fuel-saving operations that was further stimulated through provisions for honored rewards to the top vessels in achieving the most “green operations”. Our empirical findings confirm that first-line managers on board the offshore service vessels did not want to appear low on the quarterly statistics reporting on fuel-saving operations. First-line managers on board some of the vessels did not even want to be on the shift on board a vessel that carried out the least fuel-saving operations. The social pressure created by the internal competition influenced vessels that were on the lower scale in carrying out “green operations” to try to catch up with vessels that were on the upper scale in the internal competition, confirming the primacy of sociomaterial practices over

individual agency (Chia and Rasche, 2011) in fostering momentum in the organizational strategy making processes.

Enacting of fuel-saving “green operations” represented a micro-organizational day-to-day challenge where opportunities for carrying out fuel-saving operations were to be seized whenever a possibility arose during the messy realities of daily operations, presupposing that first-line managers managed to think as well as to act strategically (Wilson and Jarzabkowski, 2004), while at the same fulfilling operational duties in a safe manner. Enactment of “green operations” constituted a deliberate coping challenge (Tsoukas, 2011) for first-line managers absorbed in practical coping activities within a messy micro-organizational operative context, demanding balancing operational duties, safety requirements, and environmental issues. Environmental issues as a third parameter to be taken into consideration in addition to safe operations and economy, constituted a change in the “normal” way of operating a vessel, demanding unfreezing of ostensible routines and refreezing of new performative routines (Feldman and Pentland, 2003). Making environmentally sustainable operative praxis presupposed the enactment of new performative routines as an evolving organizational activity system over time (Jarzabowski, 2011), in this research case as a flow of fuel-saving “green operations.” Carrying out fuel-saving operations demanded micro-emancipatory leadership (Carroll, Levy and Richmond, 2008), implying temporary breakdowns of the practical coping activities (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2010) on board the vessels. Encouraging enactment of micro-emancipatory leadership by carrying out fuel-saving operations whenever an operational opportunity arose was, therefore, a further key practice in mobilizing first-line managers as micro-organizational strategy makers.

Last but not least, first-line managers were mobilized as organizational strategy makers through corporate leadership of the strategy making processes. As stated by among others Hennestad and Revang (2012), a main reason for the unsuccessful organizational change initiatives is that the strategy making processes are not lead on a continuous basis. In our case corporate leadership of the campaign throughout the entire strategy making processes constituted a decisive practice in mobilizing first-line managers as micro-organizational strategy makers. Mobilizing first-line managers in making environmentally sustainable operations demanded corporate leadership, from the introduction of the strategic idea, for which the time was right, to following-up, supporting, and facilitating the strategy making processes, more or less on a day-to-day basis.

Contributions and Avenues for Further Research

This paper contributes towards advancing our knowledge about organizational strategy making, focusing particularly on how first-line managers are mobilized as organizational strategy makers. The mobilizing practices identified might be of particular interest for other shipping companies, and may also be of interest for organizations within other industries. As is made evident, the making of environmentally sustainable operations demanded exercising of micro-emancipatory leadership (Carroll et al., 2008) for suspending existing ostensible routines, and refreezing new performative routines (Feldman and Pentland, 2003).

As micro-organizational strategy makers, first-line managers on board the offshore service vessels were responsive to prevailing institutional and organizational trends regarding environmental sustainability, relying on complex responsive processes (Stacey, 2007, in Chia and Rasche, 2011), or

sociomaterial practices (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2010), to become who and what they are, in the research case as key practitioners in enacting of an evolving stream of environmentally sustainable operative praxis.

The vital role of practice as opposed to abstract ideas as constitutive for organizational reality through the situated and recurrent nature of fuel-saving “green operations” as concrete micro-organizational activities (Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina and von Savigny, 2001) is made evident. A practice perspective posits that it is through the situated and recurrent nature of everyday activities that structural consequences are produced and become reinforced or changed over time, as emphasized by the Strategy as Practice perspective (Jarzobkowski, 2011; Orlikowski, 2011; Whittington, 2011).

Further research regarding mobilizing first-line managers as organizational strategy makers should comprise additional organizations, either as comparative studies including other shipping companies, or as extensive studies also comprising companies from other industries.

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