Organisational strategy making and first-line manager challenges: a building and dwelling perspective

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Abstract: This study explores challenges confronted by first-line managers as strategy-makers within organisational frontline contexts, referred to as sites where customers and clients as end-users are served on a day-to-day basis. In the study, Heideggerian building and dwelling perspectives are used as conceptual foundations. A building perspective implies deliberate strategy making based on goals usually determined by upper-level management. From a dwelling perspective on the other hand, strategy making is conducted non-deliberately by actors immersed in a relationally constituted nexus of social activity, as practical coping. Challenges confronted by first-line managers as strategy-makers within organisational frontline contexts as dwelling contexts are discussed, and implications for organisational strategy making as well as for the education of strategy-makers are elaborated.

Keywords: strategy making; first-line managers; organisational frontlines; Heideggerian building and dwelling perspectives; practical coping; management.

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1   Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore challenges confronted by first-line managers as strategy-makers within organisational frontline contexts, in the article referred to as sites where customers and clients as end-users are served on a day-to-day basis. First-line managers are identified as a subcategory of middle-management, situated at the lowest middle-manager level. Middle managers in general are defined as managers two or more levels below top management in the organisational hierarchy (Balogun, 2003; Caldwell, 2003; Hope, 2015).

A key responsibility for first-line managers is the management of daily operations with the aim of delivering products and services to customers and clients in due time and with proper quality. Another important responsibility is relations-oriented leadership duties due to the fact that often as many as 70–80% of all personnel in organisations (Priestland and Hanig, 2005) are employed within organisational frontline contexts. A third key responsibility is strategy making, in the form of converting strategic goals into reality within the units for which the managers have responsibility.

As strategy-makers within organisational frontline contexts, first-line managers are supposed to transform strategic intentions usually stated by upper-level management into new work-practices. The managers are supposed to perform this strategic operationalisation while at the same time taking care of task- and relational-oriented leadership duties, and without the option of further delegation of management responsibilities (Hales, 2005; Griffin, 2008). On the other hand, implementation of stated strategic intentions into new work-practices constitutes one of the greatest challenges in organisational strategy making. Research indicates that as many as 70–80% of introduced strategy-making initiatives are total failures or make things even worse (Buono and Kerber, 2010; Clegg and Walsh, 2004; Decker et al., 2012; Pellettiere, 2006).

Since the early 1990s, a significant amount of research has focused on the role and challenges of the broad group of middle managers in organisational strategy making (Balogun, 2003; Balogun and Johnson, 2005; Cruikshank et al., 2015; Floyd and Wooldridge, 1992, 1994, 1997, 2000, 2017; Hope, 2015; Lo Re et al., 2016; Mantere, 2008). Less attention so far has been granted to the particular challenges confronted by first-line managers at the lowest middle-management level as strategy-makers, indicating a gap in the research on organisational strategy making. The objective of this study is therefore to explore the distinct challenges confronted by first-line managers as strategy-makers within organisational frontline contexts.

In the research, we draw on Heidegger's (1927) building and dwelling perspectives. The building and dwelling perspectives constitute two different modes through which the world is perceived. The building mode implies that strategy-makers act intentionally on the basis of predefined goals that direct effort towards desired outcomes in the form of *purposefully planned actions* (Chia and Holt, 2006). The dwelling mode, on the other hand, implies that strategy making is carried out non-deliberately, as *purposive practical coping* (Ibid.). In practical coping, performative actions remain 'quiet' because of an unarticulated availability where consistency of actions is ordered by modus operandi, as an internalised disposition. With the objective of investigating the challenges that first-line managers encounter as strategy-makers within organisational frontline sites as dwelling contexts, the following research question is formulated: *what constitute particular challenges for first-line managers as strategy-makers within organisational frontline contexts?*

The next section establishes the study's theoretical foundation and outlines organisational frontline contexts as arenas for strategy making. The following section specifies methodological issues related to empirically revealing strategy-making challenges within organisational frontline contexts, as experienced by first-line managers. Subsequently follows a presentation of the study's main empirical findings as well as a discussion of how the findings relate to the role of first-line managers as strategy-makers with reference to theory and practice. The article concludes with a summary of the study's implications as well as its weaknesses, including directions for further research.

2 Theoretical perspectives

As stated above, the building and dwelling perspectives (Heidegger, 1927) are two different modes through which the world is perceived. The building mode constitutes a form of detached coping where strategy-makers act intentionally and in a self-motivated manner (Chia and Holt, 2006). In the building mode, actions are guided by prior mental representations, and phenomena are assigned identities, meanings and functions based on predefined goals that direct effort towards desired outcomes. The dwelling mode, on the other hand, is a mode through which the act and actions of strategy making are carried out non-deliberately through 'availableness' characterised by an absorbed intentionality, as a non-thematic circumspective absorption (Chia and Holt, 2006). In the dwelling mode the actor is totally immersed in his or her surroundings as a 'being-in-the-world' (Dreyfus, 1990), and actions are directed towards overcoming immediate impediments, through purposive practical coping. Purposive practical coping constitutes a relatively smooth and unobtrusive responsiveness to circumstances that enables human beings to get around and do what they do, through practical activities. As actors they are the practices (Dreyfus, 1990), and their identity and individuality emerge through material practices. Practical coping thus involves intentionality of the body rather than of the mind (Chia and Holt, 2006) and constitutes a thoroughly material response to the world guided by habitus, as an immersed strategy that ensures consistency of actions even though the actors may be unaware of it.

Strategy making as practical coping thus constitutes a kind of flexible responsiveness to a situation as it unfolds. The world comes into being and takes on significance through its incorporation into everyday activities (Ingold, 2000). This logic is in accordance with Weick's (2001) concept of enacted 'sensemaking', in that strategy appears to emerge in line with the assertion that strategy-makers do not know what they think or want until they see what their actions lead to. Thus, the strategy appears not to be fully articulated until well into the implementation phase.

The characteristics of the Heideggerian *building* and *dwelling* modes are summarised in Table 1.

In facilitating the conversion of stated strategic intention into new work-practices within organisational frontline contexts, first-line managers may take on the role of navigator or the role of interpreter (Palmer and Dunford, 2008). The navigator role presumes that strategy making can be carried out through top-down interventions. The role of interpreter, on the other hand, is based on the assumption that strategy making only to a limited extent can be managed through upper-level managers` interference, because strategy making is a social process created through human interpretation of what

constitute meaningful actions and activities. This implies that successful strategy making within frontline contexts calls for first-line managers capable of adhering to predefined goals while at the same time taking on the role of interpreter by facilitating strategy making in a way that reflects sensitivity to the relationally constituted nexus of social activities within actual organisational contexts.

Table 1   Building and dwelling as modes for agency and action

Building	Dwelling
Strategic actors as observers – acting self-consciously, intentionally and self-motivated.	Strategy-makers act non-deliberately, immersed in a relationally constituted nexus of social activity.
Action is guided by prior mental representations – phenomena are assigned identities, meanings and functions.	Action through availableness and ready-to-hand phronetic appreciation.
Action is guided by predefined goals that direct effort towards desired outcomes – as purposefully planned action.	Action is directed towards overcoming immediate impediment – as purposive practical coping.
Action as viewed by observers relying on a logic of explanation.	Action as viewed by actors applying a logic of practice.
Action becomes conscious because of an articulated occurrentness.	Performative action remains 'quiet' because of an unarticulated availability.
Consistency of action assumed to be ordered by deliberate intent.	Consistency of action assumed to be ordered by modus operandi – as an internalised disposition

Source: Chia and Holt (2006)

Even further, strategy making within organisational frontline contexts is supposed to be performed within stated financial and time frames, while the manager is also attending to customers and clients and maintaining relations with suppliers, as well as staying in touch with other stakeholders – and all of this while embedded in an increasingly dynamic global ecosystem. Typical first-line managers' work-context and arena for organisational strategy making is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1   First line managers' work-area for strategy making (see online version for colours)
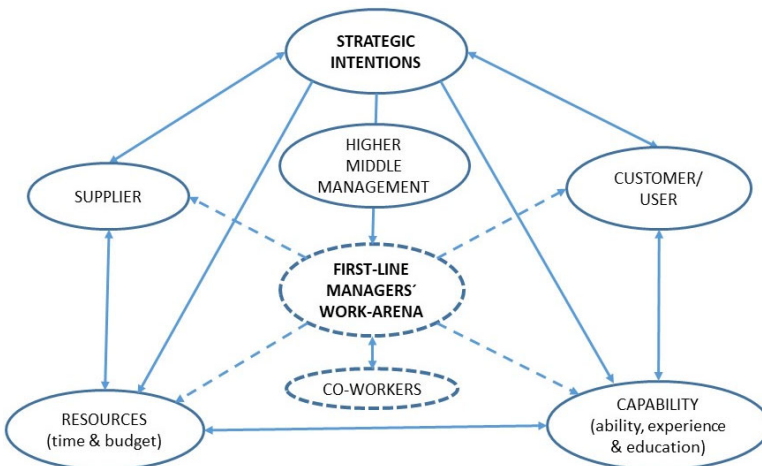
Figure 1 shows that first-line managers' position between higher middle management and co-workers at the organisational frontline constitutes a key position within organisational systems. It further illustrates that first-line managers are key linking pins between suppliers and customers/users. Even further, the figure makes evident that first-line managers are supposed to carry out their duties within the limits of available resources in the form of time and budget as well as the capabilities available within their areas of responsibility. The elements in the figure, and the interrelations among them, constitute the first-line manager's role as a key position in organisational strategy making.

3 Methodology and data collection

A qualitative research approach was chosen to gain a deeper understanding of the particular challenges confronting first-line managers as strategy-makers within organisational frontline contexts as work-arenas (Ghauri and Grønhaug, 2002; Griffin, 2008). The empirical data was collected through interviews with first-line managers within 12 different organisations, including five public and seven private organisations. The public organisations consisted of municipalities as well as other public bodies. The private enterprises included shipbuilding yards, oil and gas enterprises, and maritime shipping companies. The criteria for the selection of organisations to form part of the research sample were that the enterprises had more than 100 employees, that they recently had been through strategic change processes of some magnitude and that they had an organisational structure consisting of at least three levels.

The data collection took place through individual or focus-group interviews with a total of 75 first-line managers within the 12 organisations in the sample; all of the interviewees were responsible for human resources, and many of them were also responsible for financial functions within their areas of responsibility. The interviews were conducted partly in 2008–2009, partly in 2013–2014 and partly in 2015–2016, and were carried out based on a semi-structured interview-guide. Items identified in the literature and the researchers' own practical experience as middle managers formed the basis for the questions in the guide, and were particularly directed towards identifying challenges across the 12 organisations experienced during strategy-making processes (Stake, 2000).

To verify the validity of the data collected after the interview-processes were completed the interviewees were invited to a meeting to discuss the most important findings. During the review-session no new phenomena or causalities beyond those which had already been identified were detected.

4 Empirical findings

The empirical findings verify that strategy making within organisational frontline contexts is challenging. Particularly, actions and activities within organisational frontline contexts are first and foremost directed towards overcoming immediate operational and administrative duties. Thus, first-line managers are supposed to prioritise these duties, while at the same time acting as strategy-makers. The challenges related to acting as

strategy-maker while at the same time taking care of day-to-day operations, are reinforced by the fact that the immediate antecedent in day-to-day operations often are difficult to plan for because of unforeseen activities that might arise during the day. Even further, the challenges related to strategy making within organisational frontline contexts are aggravated by requests from staff-units that on behalf of top management are calling for administrative reports regarding operational activities. In addition, first-line managers reported limited freedom when it came to financial affairs, particularly within public enterprises.

Challenges related to acting as strategy-maker within organisational frontline contexts are reinforced by the fact that first-line managers typically have responsibility for a significant number of employees; within some of the 12 organisations in the sample, the interviewed managers were responsible for 40 to 50 individuals. Even further, work schedules that included evening and night work made regular contact with each of the employees extra challenging, not least during organisational strategy-making processes. Still another challenge was maintaining an appropriate balance between operational-, relations- and strategy-making activities within work-arenas that were often (over)full of day-to-day duties.

Table 2   Challenges faced by first-line managers as strategy makers within organisational frontline contexts

Key findings:

- Organisational frontline contexts are hectic work-arenas, often with an 'overfull plate' of duties.
- Operational and administrative duties expected to be prioritised.
- Relations-oriented leadership duties called for much attention because up to 40–50 employees are often expected to be 'seen and heard' on a regular basis.
- Financial conditions put a ceiling on first-line managers' freedom of action, particularly within public organisations.
- Upper-level management's attention to a large extent absent during strategy-making processes except in the case of major deviations from stated strategic goals and procedures.
- First-line managers did not experience upper-level managers to have a sufficient understanding of challenges that might crop up during strategy-making processes.
- The voice of first-line managers only to a limited extent listened to during strategy-making processes.

On the other hand, the empirical findings indicate that implementation of strategic intentions within organisational frontline arenas is supposed to proceed without the involvement and support of upper-level management except in the case of major deviations from stated strategic goals or operational procedures. Though organisational frontline contexts in the first place are organised with the prime objective of servicing the customers and end-users, upper-level management's attention was to a large extent found to be absent on a regular basis. A key statement in this respect was that "upper-level managers only state strategic goals, but do not follow-up and support first-line managers during the processes." Furthermore, several of the interviewees stated that they did not experience upper-level management to have sufficient knowledge of challenges related to strategy making within organisational frontline contexts. On the other hand, first-line managers did not experience that their voice as strategy-makers was listened to. "Our

voice does not receive the attention it ought to have", was a representative statement in this respect, and another was "There is less prestige working within organizational front-line contexts."

Key empirical findings are summarised in Table 2.

5   Discussion

Acting as first-line manager and strategy-maker within organisational frontline contexts is challenging. Organisational frontline contexts are hectic work-arenas where many different processes and activities are supposed to be to be carried out on a day-to-day basis, constituting frontline contexts as a multifaceted organisational everyday ontology. A key challenge for first-line managers as strategy-makers is to bridge strategic intentions grounded on a building worldview and a dwelling worldview grounded on practical coping (Heidegger, 1927). This is supposed to be done while only to a limited extent being involved in discursive processes aimed at developing strategic goals. On the other hand, the findings point out that first-line managers do not always perceive upper-level managers as having sufficient knowledge of operational issues to be able to specify the strategic goals, which eventually are supposed to be transformed into new ways of working within organisational frontline contexts.

As strategy-makers, first-line managers are thus supposed to implement more or less abstract and inaccurate strategic intentions stated by upper-level management into new work practices without being involved in building the strategic goals. Discursive ideas developed based on thematic awareness are therefore supposed to be reinterpreted (Palmer and Dunford, 2008) to facilitate practical coping actions and activities. Tsoukas (2010) identifies this as a deliberate coping challenge demanding explicit awareness and articulation as well as reinterpretation of stated strategic goals. Strategic goals have to be retroactively reframed into concrete strategy-making actions and activities to be carried out to realise new practical consciousness (Giddens, 1984), implying an ability to live and act in accordance with stated strategic intentions without being explicitly aware of them. A key challenge in this respect is to ascertain that the specified goals resonate with modus operandi (Chia and Holt, 2006), as the internalised dispositions within actual organisational frontline contexts.

Realising new practical consciousness within frontline arenas as dwelling contexts thus calls for first-line managers capable of fusing propositional properties and practical coping actions and activities, facilitating strategy making as practical coping by actors immersed within a nexus of social activity. Appropriate practical coping actions and activities presuppose availableness and ready-to-hand appreciation of prevailing conditions within actual organisational contexts where decisions and actions emanate from being in situ (Chia and Holt, 2006). Being in situ implies that decisions and actions are grounded in internalised predispositions developed over time on the basis of social, cultural and technological traditions. The traditions predefine what constitute meaningful strategy-making actions and activities, calling for first-line managers that are sensitive to the social and cultural embeddedness of prevailing practices within actual organisational contexts (Regner, 2003). Practical coping action and activities to realise stated strategic intentions are therefore supposed to find resonance within the organisational contexts in question. On the other hand, if they do not, a key challenge is to facilitate processes

aimed at unfreezing (Lewin, 1947) dominant organisational norms and values to make them receptive for collective purposive practical coping (Chia and Holt, 2006).

Ingold (2000) terms this strategy-making challenge as 'wayfinding', implying learning and knowing through iterative practical coping actions taken in situ and sua sponte. Wayfinding is supposed to be carried out within evolving and changing circumstances, where the strategic path is 'known as one goes' [Ingold, (2000), p.229]. During the wayfinding processes, first-line managers as strategy-makers act on the basis of their repertoire of practices generated from experiences, refined sensitivities and habituated ways of responding by tentatively negotiating their way through uncharted terrain (Chia, 2017). Practices as such are the primary 'tools' that managers rely on to construct social orders, and the practices help sharpen empirical sensitivities and ensure the development of appropriate actions and activities to realise new practical consciousness (Giddens, 1984). Organisations succeed by sensing, improvising and adapting as they go. In contrast to navigation (Palmer and Dunford, 2008), which primarily relies on pre-established maps and which assumes that strategy-makers must know cognitively 'before they go' (Chia, 2017), strategy making as practical coping takes place non-deliberately where the actors find their strategic path 'as they go'. Thus, strategy making within organisational frontline contexts calls for cognitive human interpretation of what constitutes meaningful actions and activities, where first-line manager's organisational and relational sensitivity constitutes the basis for appropriate manoeuvres (Collins, 1998).

6   Implications

6.1   Implications for organisational strategy making

A building and dwelling perspective throws new light on organisational strategy making, and particularly on challenges related to converting strategic intentions into new work-practices within organisational frontline contexts. Within organisational frontline contexts, daily actions and activities are to a large extent grounded in a dwelling perspective. A dwelling perspective is based on a logic of practice developed through experience gained over time, through practical coping (Chia and Holt, 2006). Strategy making founded on a building perspective, on the other hand, is based on strategic goals that are grounded in a logic of explanation and are supposed to direct efforts towards desired outcomes. Thus, transforming stated strategic intentions into new practice within organisational frontline contexts presupposes the bridging of two contrasting logics: the logic of explanation and the logic of practice. This constitutes what Tsoukas (2010) characterises as a deliberate coping challenge, calling for retroactive reframing aimed at attuning the stated strategic goals to meaningful practical coping activities. As strategy-makers, first-line managers are supposed to make retroactive sense of strategic intentions in order to consolidate, further refine or change the existing pattern of operational actions and activities to realise new practical consciousness (Giddens, 1984). This calls for an understanding of the social and cultural traditions within the organisational frontline contexts in question, including habits and customs embodied in the everyday interactions and activities in the form of skills and overriding predispositions (Bourdieu, 1990).

At the same time, first-line managers are supposed to act as role models during the strategy-making processes, maintaining trust through a combination of hands-on management and communication. Trustworthy communication requires that the stated strategic intentions be internalised (Balogun, 2003), and, thus, made "integral to one's make-up" [Chia and Rasche, (2015), p.40]. Even further, acting as a role model during organisational strategy-making processes calls for practical wisdom as well as situational leadership to be wisely exercised in the form of metis (Scott, 1998), implying the ability to know how and when to apply rules of thumb in concrete situations. Metis thus reflects a kind of situational intelligence particularly applicable to ambiguous settings that do not lend themselves to precise measurement and rigorous logic (Baumard, 1999).

Finally, a building and dwelling perspective also points to the influence of the organisational system as such in promoting or hampering the realisation of stated strategic goals. A key aspect in this respect is the communication between organisational levels during the strategy-making processes. Bridging detached and practical coping through deliberate coping (Tsoukas, 2010) requires extensive communication between strategy-makers at various organisational levels during the processes (Bunderson et al., 2016; Shotter, 2005, 2006). In particular, strategic knowledge collected by upper-level management needs to be fused with more detailed practice-oriented knowledge at lower organisational levels. The challenge of fusing strategic and operational knowledge points to first-line managers as key communicational linking pins (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1994; Likert, 1961) through articulation and reinterpretation of the stated strategic goals, as a form of bricolage (Eikeland, 2012; Levi-Strauss, 1966). The empirical findings, however, indicate that first-line managers primarily experience their role as strategy-makers as being soldiers who implement strategic intentions in line with guidelines worked out by upper-level management (Folta, 1998; Handy, 1997). The organisational system, with its structures of membership, hierarchies, rules, control and sanctions (Ahrne and Brunsson, 2011), only partly takes advantage of the key role played by first-line managers as processors of detailed operational knowledge that might also be useful as input during organisational strategy-making processes. Taking advantage of first-line managers` knowledge and experience might increase the success rate of organisational strategy making, particularly when it comes to reconciling propositional strategic intentions and situational coping skills within organisational frontline contexts. Even further, stated strategic intentions would more easily be accepted as meaningful strategy-making actions and activities to solve challenges experienced within organisational frontline contexts. The stated strategic goals might also to a larger extent resonate with the prevailing logic within organisational frontline contexts, and, thus, more probably be accepted as the basis for practical coping actions and activities carried out more or less tacitly (Gjøsæter and Kyvik, 2015; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2011) as practical new consciousness (Giddens, 1984). This, however, presupposes dialogical communication processes between strategy-makers at various organisational levels during the emerging strategy-making processes, including managers at the lowest management level within organisational systems, thus narrowing the knowing-doing gap (Pfeffer and Sutton, 1999).

In line with current research in the field (Argyris, 2002; Parker, 2018; Tengblad, 2012), it is likely that the appropriate cognitive flexibility and openness for dialogical communication across disciplines and organisational contexts is best learned while future leaders and managers are still in an educational context.

6.2   Implications for education of organisational strategy-makers

The objective of reducing the knowing-doing gap also appears to have clear implications for the education of organisational strategy-makers. With reference to the thoughts of Hodgkinson et al. (2002) and Huff (2000), knowledge production is radically changing, also requiring continued dynamic adaptation of what learning institutions offer and how they interact with stakeholders. There seems to exist, then, an urgent need to rethink the traditional business schools' sole focus on leadership, management, administration, organisation and finance/economics, and in addition to encourage and actively stimulate more collaboration with engineering and other faculties as well as with firms within the schools' surrounding ecosystems (Kyvik, 2018). The argument is that increasingly involving students in university-industry interactions will help future leaders to appreciate the effective interactions required between the first-line managers and managers at higher management-levels. Learning to become aware of and starting these learning processes at the university campus might stimulate inter- and cross-disciplinary cognitive collaboration processes and lead to an increase in both explorative and exploitative knowledge sharing (Jansen et al., 2009) between faculties and small and large firms located in the surrounding business clusters.

Eventually, from a first-line manager's perspective, it appears important that the top managers or top management team either have 'been at the front' or are sufficiently humble to learn which knowledge and competences are most valid in the juxtaposing of demands faced by employees in front of customers and end-users. Part of this key competence is the prime ability to function in the role of first-line manager, and secondly to be able to bridge strategic intentions and operational demands as well as taking care of relations-oriented leadership duties. The theory required for functioning as an effective first-line manager or future CEO may be learned at the university, but the rest will still need to be apprehended within practical organisational contexts.

7   Conclusions

The study's empirical findings and the subsequent elaboration indicate that involving first-line managers more in organisational strategy making might increase the success rate of strategy-making efforts, thus taking advantage of first-line managers' key position as communicational linking pins (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1994; Likert, 1961) between strategic and operational knowledge within organisational systems. Knowledge available within organisational front lines might then also to a larger extent be fused into organisational processes and facilitate the conversion of strategic intentions into meaningful strategy-making actions and activities, thus, increasing the success rate of organisational strategy-making efforts. The stated strategic goals would also to a larger extent resonate with the prevailing logic within actual organisational contexts, and, thus, more probably be accepted as the basis for practical coping actions and activities. This, however, presupposes dialogical communication processes between strategy-makers at various organisational levels, including first-line managers at the lowest middle-management level within organisational systems.

A building and dwelling perspective on organisational strategy making also reminds us, as educators and researchers, of the importance of resisting the seduction of the superficial and to dare to look beneath the surface of social phenomena and focus on the

'rough ground' (Chia and Rasche, 2015; Dunne, 1992) of frontline sites as contexts for organisational strategy making. It is the challenge of research on organisational strategy making to explore the spontaneous emergence of such processes and appreciate the myriad activities involved in creating new practical consciousness (Giddens, 1984). This requires grasping the internal cognitive logic of local coping activities that take place largely unplanned and in situ in dealing with the exigencies of an evolving situation, immanent in everyday practical coping. To grasp these immanent aspects scholars need to embrace the reality of tacit forms of understanding (Polani, 1966) and the meaning of local forms of knowing (Chia and Rasche, 2015).

8   Limitations and directions for further research

The study raises important issues for both theory and practice related to organisational strategy making. The empirical findings and subsequent conclusions should, however, not be generalised to other organisations without conditions. The empirical data represents the voice of first-line managers, and other voices might express other opinions of challenges related to successful strategy making within organisations. Even further, the Norwegian cultural setting might not be comparable to samples drawn from other cultures. In addition, the chosen sample may not be representative for other organisational contexts. A natural next step in this research might therefore be to expand the data to include informants from several levels within organisational systems to verify how strategic agents from other areas of responsibility perceive what promotes and/or hinders organisational strategy making. Another tentative research topic might be an investigation of how the organisational hierarchy and degree of bureaucracy (Bunderson et al., 2016) affect strategy making within organisations.

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