



Committing To Strategy

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Abstract

Commitment to strategy is crucial to effective implementation. Previous work on the generation of commitment to strategy has suggested to make the process more inclusive and less formal. In this paper, we contend that, apart from process, strategy *content* too must change. Inverting dominant epistemological and ontological assumptions about strategy content we present the concept of “personalized strategizing”. Exploring personalized strategizing in three firms we have found that strategists were *embodying* themselves in the strategy content, making themselves *vulnerable* by doing so, and passing a point beyond which they couldn’t disown the strategy anymore – the process had become *irreversible*. We conclude that, in addition to inclusion and de-formalization of process, personalization of content might be an antecedent of commitment to strategy.

Keywords: Commitment to strategy, personalized strategy, embodiment, vulnerability, irreversibility.

Commitment to strategy has been identified as a crucial ingredient of effective implementation of strategy (Floyd and Wooldridge 1992; Mintzberg 1994; Westley 1990). Unfortunately, commitment to strategy is often weak, and sometimes altogether absent. As Guth and MacMillan point out, "...middle managers who feel that their goals are compromised can not only redirect the strategy, delay implementation, or reduce the quality of implementation, but they could also even totally sabotage the strategy" (Guth and MacMillan 1986:320).

Remedies put forward to deal with the "commitment gap" between strategy formulation and implementation typically emphasize how strategizing should become more inclusive and less formalized. The assumption motivating this paper, however, is that such a change in the *process* of strategy has to be complemented by a change in the *content* of strategy as well.

To explore this assumption, we collected data from a series of workshops in what we call *personalized strategizing*. These were carried out with senior strategy-makers of three different organizations. In this paper we present an analysis of the qualitative data from these workshops, and identify three distinct phenomena brought about by a change in the content of the strategies:

Participants were *embodying* themselves in the strategy.

They made themselves *vulnerable* by doing so.

Beyond a certain point, the process became *irreversible*: participants couldn't disown their strategy anymore.

On the basis of the analytical data offered in this paper, we argue for the following: Personalization of content is an important factor in generating commitment to strategy. In the course of expounding this argument, we also critique the prevailing notion of commitment in organization studies (developed by Porter et al. 1974) and offer an alternative definition that is more flexible and more scalable.

COMMITMENT TO STRATEGY

Defining Commitment

For the understanding of organizational commitment, the framework developed by Porter, Mowday, and Steers (Mowday *et al.* (1979); Porter *et al.* (1974)) has become the de facto standard¹. These authors defines commitment by three factors:

A strong belief in and acceptance of the organization's goals and values.

A willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization.

A definite desire to maintain organizational membership.

For two reasons, this definition is problematic for our purposes: First, the *focus* of commitment is on the organization, not strategy. But employees can be committed to a strategy without wholly embracing all the organizational goals and values (contra factor #1) and they can be committed to a strategy without having a desire to remain organizational members (contra factor #2). Moreover, desire to maintain organizational membership is arguably not a part of commitment itself but rather an *an outcome or manifestation* of commitment (contra factor #3). Instead of a monolithic focus on *the* organization, we assume that organizational members are committed, in varying degrees, to numerous sets of goals and values (see also Reichers 1985).

¹ It has been used by, for example, Kim and Mauborgne (1993), Wooldridge and Floyd (1990), Randall (1987), or Angle and Perry (1981). Porter and associates have also developed the "Organizational Commitment Questionnaire" (OCQ) which – like their concept of commitment – has proved very popular in organizational studies. It is reprinted in full in Mowday *et al.* (1979), along with a summary of the studies in which it had been used up to then. Despite the prevalence of the OCQ, different understandings of commitment abound, so that the concept has been criticized as becoming redundant (e.g. Morrow 1983).

Second, Porter *et al.*'s definition lacks *normativity*: Their conception is about "belief", "willingness", and "desire" – all of which seem to originate completely from within the individual without the contribution of outside pressures. Employees commit because they want to or because it serves their interest. This assumption underlies most of the literature on commitment. Korsgaard and Schweiger (1995:61), for example, define commitment to strategic decisions as "the extent to which team members accept the strategic decision reached and intend to cooperate in carrying it out". Thus, commitment is seen as a wholly private affair, being either goodwill (as in Porter *et al.* or Korsgaard and Schweiger) or calculative self-interest (e.g. Floyd and Wooldridge 1992; Guth/MacMillan 1986²).

We not only view commitment as somebody's spontaneous willingness but also an *obligation* to act in a certain way. Because it can be the consequence of a pledge or promise, commitment has a *public* side too. In an organizational context, commitment can arise out of explicitly stated intentions (e.g. signing a contract) or an implicit system of conventions (e.g. by assuming a certain position, co-workers will expect a certain behavior). The most important contrast between private and public commitment, is that public commitment cannot be revoked by the committing person alone – there is an *obligation towards others* as well. In that sense, commitment may also go *against* one's interest or comfort and, therefore, cannot be the same as instrumental calculation³.

Based on this reasoning and our review of the literature we define commitment as *an alignment with a purpose that is distinct from self-interest and is sustained by emotional attachment and/or moral obligation*.

Generating Commitment

The problem underlying the commitment literature is that there are no easy ways for an organization to earn its members' commitment. Ultimately this discourse touches on fundamental questions about human nature: Will we, if left to our own devices, act only to our own benefit, or also that of others? In management writing this question has been famously captured in McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y (McGregor 1960). In the literature on commitment the pessimistic and the optimistic view both have had their proponents.

Generating commitment through reward and punishment

The pessimistic view of human nature has spawned a whole genre of management writing, a prominent representative of which is agency theory (see Eisenhardt 1989; Harris and Raviv 1978, Jensen and Meckling 1976, and Ross 1973). In agency theory, the concept of commitment is reduced to either fear of punishment or self-interest.

The basic problem of agency theory is the relationship between a principal, e.g. a shareholder, and an agent, e.g. a CEO, that takes on work on behalf of the principal. Assuming a pessimistic view of human nature, the problem is how to make the agent commit to the interests of the principal if (a) his or her own interests conflict with these and (b) it is difficult for the principal to ensure "correct" behavior on the part of the agent.

Agency theory has coined the revealing term "moral hazard" for the risk posed by potential inappropriate behavior of the agent. (However, despite the word "moral" appearing in it, there is

² Guth and MacMillan develop an elaborate mathematical model (based on expectancy theory) that is supposed to mimick the inner workings of the self-interested individual and postulate that it will act in accordance with or counter to strategic decisions depending on whether the calculated outcome is positive or negative.

³ We agree with Wiener (1982) that to include calculation would not be "theoretically parsimonious", since a considerable body of work consists already on instrumental motivation and the like (see also our discussion of the "pessimistic view" on generating commitment below).

not really a question of morality here – the agent is assumed to be amoral in any case.) Agency theory's answer to the problem of avoiding moral hazard, i.e. generating commitment, is either to supervise the agent's behavior or align the agent's interests with those of the principal, usually through profit sharing or co-ownership.

This fundamentally pessimistic view of how to generate commitment in organizations can also be found in the strategy literature proper. For example, Guth and MacMillan's (1986) proposals for generating commitment to strategy include using "political tools", reward good performance with "rapid positive reinforcement", and coercing unwilling employees through "threat of sanctions".

Generating commitment through appropriate practices

In contrast to the pessimistic view on generating commitment, another, more optimistic stream of literature holds that commitment is not based on contingent rewards and punishments but is generated through appropriate practices. Proposals out of this stream tend to call for a "humanization" of work practice, e.g. increased opportunities for development or freedom to act independently (e.g. Kinnear and Sutherland 2000; Dessler 1999).

With respect to strategy, inclusion has been an often proposed remedy against the lack of commitment to strategy. Strategy scholars demand consideration of input from everybody in a team (Korsgaard and Schweiger 1995) or even throughout the organization (Hamel 1996), a "conversation" about strategy across both vertical and horizontal lines of communication (Westley 1990) or the possibility for subsidiaries to challenge corporate strategy (Kim and Mauborgne 1993). Some empirical evidence points to a causal link between inclusion and commitment (Oswald et al. 1994; Kim and Mauborgne 1993).

However, there may be more to commitment than inclusion into the strategy process. In a study about the effects of middle management inclusion in strategizing Wooldridge and Floyd (1990:238) noted that "respondents conveyed that low levels of involvement may reduce commitment, but that *involvement alone does not create commitment*" (our emphasis). Further evidence for this comes from participant observation in the strategy processes of four Scandinavian media firms (Roos et al. 1996; Aadne 2000). All these firms went through processes of restructuring or reconceiving their businesses. While building a new strategy it was generally tried to include a broad range of employees (these were medium-sized firms), which at first *did* create some enthusiasm among participants. But boredom and detachment soon followed because the process, for all its inclusiveness, did not engage or excite the participants as much as it aspired to.

Apart from exclusion, overformalization has been identified in the literature as a major obstacle to the generation of commitment to strategy. Formalized strategizing in the guise of "planning" has, among other things, been accused of killing initiatives, being frustratingly inflexible, creating a class of strategists detached from operational business – and, especially, of widening the gap between formulation and implementation of strategy. A stronger valuation of soft knowledge (e.g. intuition in addition to numbers), a richer system of codification (e.g. images in addition to graphs), and the inclusion of operational managers have been proposed to de-formalize strategizing (e.g. Mintzberg 1994).

In sum, the literature on organizational commitment in general and commitment to strategy in particular suggests that more inclusion and less formalism are necessary to generate more commitment to strategy.

Generating Commitment Through Personalized Strategizing

Although, more inclusion and less formalism are needed, this is not enough. Why? Because both inclusion and de-formalization primarily impact the strategy *process* but not necessarily its *content*. Extending the effort to better understand what underlies commitment to strategy, we

suggest that after reconceiving the *who* (inclusion) and *how* (de-formalization) of strategizing, we should also reconsider its *what*, the strategy content.

To reconsider the notion of strategy content we need to be aware of two “dominant logics” (Bettis and Prahalad 1995) – one epistemological, one ontological – that have been driving much of strategy theory and practice:

Epistemology: The content of strategy is not affected by the person of the strategist.

Strategizing has for decades been in the grip of a cognitivist epistemology which holds that cognition of the world is unaffected by the position of the observer (see Simon 1993 as an example for cognitivist strategy theory and von Krogh *et al.* 1994 for a critique). The formulation of strategy – the scanning of the landscape or assessing of strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats – is assumed to be unaffected by the strategists *per se*.

Ontology: The content of strategy abstracts away from the specific.

The enduring popularity of abstraction and “generic strategies” (Porter 1980) is well known and manifest in PIMS models, value chains, experience curves, balanced scorecard, or the ubiquitous 2-by-2 matrix.

An inversion of these two dominant logics would imply a most radical change in the conception of strategy content and result in the following statements:

Inversed epistemology: The content of strategy is affected by the person of the strategist.

Inversed ontology: The content of strategy preserves the specific.

It is immediately obvious that after an inversion of the dominant epistemological and ontological assumptions, strategy content would be *personalized*. The inversed epistemology conceives of strategists as *affecting the strategy by their very personalities*. They are not only the mediums *through* which strategy content is created but potentially a part *of* that content.

The inversed ontological imperative leads to a positive valuation of the concrete or idiosyncratic. Because its emphasis on “the specific” discourages sweeping generalization, rash abstraction, and alignment with mainstream categories of strategy (industry, competitor, vision, mission), it calls for *preserving* personal traces in the emerging strategy content. Strategizing that is driven by this two inversed logics, is what we call “personalized strategizing”.

METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of this study we gathered data during workshops we administered in three different organizations. We first provide some context information for each these three workshops and then explain in detail the format of the workshops.

Case #1: InterBlot – A Machine Manufacturing Firm

Building on a groundbreaking technological innovation several decades ago, InterBlot is a globally operating manufacturer of printing machines. It's business is tripartite: It sells printing machines, a special printing material, and after-sales services. Its traditional customers are printing firms that sell to retailers who in turn sell to end users. InterBlot has a market share of more than 50% in its segment and has traditionally been very profitable. Because customer base and market penetration of retailers' products are growing steadily, strategy has traditionally been an exercise in accurate prediction of future sales. However, small clouds are currently forming on the horizon as InterBlot's once innovative printing technology is increasingly being challenged by substitute technology.

We studied the entire leadership team of one of the larger subsidiaries. This subsidiary faced the following issues in particular:

InterBlot had recently acquired a manufacturer of the substitute technology in the operating area of the subsidiary. So for its management team, a former rival suddenly became a "sibling".

In the local market, retailers were trying to bypass the printers and get machines and printing material directly off InterBlot. Although InterBlot's corporate strategy was clearly to stay loyal to their traditional constituency, the printers, the management of the subsidiary was less clear about that.

A relatively strained relationship between corporate headquarters and the subsidiary: There was a feeling within the management of the subsidiary that HQ was monopolizing innovation and holding back information.

To establish the trust needed for open discussions about strategy process and content we met several times with senior executives of both InterBlot's corporate HQ and the subsidiary. Then a one-day workshop with the top management team of the subsidiary took place at an offsite location in April 2001. There were seven participants, all heavily involved in strategy-making: The managing director of the subsidiary and executives who all reported directly to him. One of them, the senior executive in charge of sales, had been a partner in a major international management consulting firm. His responsibilities included "ownership" of the strategy ("planning") process. This included decisions about format of documents and presentations.

The workshop was a "pilot" for InterBlot to experiment with a new strategizing technique. The stated objective of the workshop was to "discuss strategy in a new way".

Case #2: Hearsay – A Telecommunications Firm

Hearsay had started out in its national market against the strong competition of a public telecommunications company and during the 1990ies soon grew into a major player. At this time, in a major phase of expansion for the telecom industry, a big national telecommunications company from another country took control of Hearsay. The new owner decided to integrate some of its businesses into Hearsay, rather than the other way round. This called for a new, more international strategy.

It also meant that employees from numerous other companies (who in total outnumbered the employees at Hearsay) had to be integrated into the strong Hearsay culture which was very dear

to Hearsay employees and potentially incompatible with the culture of the other businesses that were being integrated into Hearsay.

Hearsay had previously set up a team to do both conventional and non-conventional strategic planning. In the strategy team there was, for example, a group whose job it was to envision the future business landscape, bring down the possible futures to a “manageable thread”, “distill it into strategic objectives”, and “build a map for the future” (in the words of one of them); and another group, responsible for “strategic alignment” that was thinking about various ways of enlisting the employees (especially those in the newly integrated businesses) for the strategy being developed by the strategy groups.

Because it was time to develop a new vision and strategy, corporate top management had asked the strategy team to design and implement an elaborate planning process, involving senior managers from all the international businesses. “Plot the course and steer the ship” should be the spirit of this exercise, according to one senior executive. The process was to be initiated in mid 2001.

During 2001 we met several times with all members of the strategy team and the strategic planners of all the international businesses that were being integrated into Hearsay. We then initiated an experimental workshop focusing on the anticipated strategy process in the context of post-acquisition integration. The workshop took place offsite over two days in June 2002. The stated objective for the workshop was to “further the draft design of the strategy process”. A preliminary design already available sketched a three-phase traditional planning process, involving more than 70 people from over ten businesses.

Case #3: TinkerCorp – A Specialty Chemicals Firm

TinkerCorp produces fragrances and flavors for the fashion and food industries. It started out in the fragrance business quite a long time ago. Until recently the segment the firm operates in had been a kind of “gentleman’s club” where everyone knew each other. The specialists tended to be loyal to their employers, and there was enough room for everybody. Strategy was just a matter of projecting sales figures from the past into the future, discontinuous developments were rare.

About ten years ago, with TinkerCorp diversifying into a variety of specialty chemicals and with competition from Asia getting fiercer, senior management realized that another approach to strategy was needed. In the mid nineties, the firm had, for the first time, started to do long term (i.e. three year) planning. In TinkerCorp’s strategy process, modelled after the Balanced Scorecard approach (Kaplan and Norton 1992), hard and soft variables are balanced in the formulation of high level goals and these diversified into ever finer action plans.

By the end of 2001 TinkerCorp had finalized their strategy plan for the next three years, based on vision, objectives, measures, and “strategic projects” addressing critical issues. Despite thick document that had resulted from this, senior managers were somewhat concerned that the plan was too similar to the previous one and were therefore receptive to the idea of experimenting with a different technique. We agreed to stage an experimental workshop with the stated objective of trying “to enrich” TinkerCorp’s strategy. The entire top management team of nine people, including the president, participated in the two-day workshop held onsite in February 2002.

Workshop Format

In previous studies, commitment has been used as both the dependent and the independent variable, i.e. researchers have looked for antecedents as well as outcomes of commitment. Our interest is in the antecedents of commitment. The vast majority of work on the antecedents of commitment has been looking for statistical correlations, typically identifying co-occurrence of commitment and other pre-given variables at one point in time. Such correlations are usually established by administering a single round of survey (e.g. Steers 1977). Some researchers,

however, have also been looking for causal relations, established by longitudinal research (e.g. Kim and Mauborgne 1993 and Bateman and Strasser 1984).

Our research method falls into the paradigm of action science (Argyris *et al.* 1985). Our data consists primarily of observations and notes taken during workshops administered with each of the three firms introduced above. In addition to that, each workshop was recorded on video and the tapes were analyzed afterwards. With some of the participants we also conducted semi-structured interviews, before the workshops to establish a baseline with respect to strategy practices in each firm and after the workshops to assess the impact of the workshops. What we present, is an *argument*, not a proof, from empirical evidence gathered in three organizations.

Our use of direct observation as a means of gathering data allowed us to start out with the general assumption that the personalization of strategy content might have something to do with commitment, that it might somehow “bind” strategists to strategy. But exactly what about personalization might possibly do that, was not known apriori. This insight emerged only during the course of observation.

For the administration of the workshops we used a technique called LEGO Serious Play[®] because it is specially designed to make strategizing more personal. LEGO Serious Play is an adult learning tool grounded in theories of play (research leading to the development of this technique has been reported in Roos and Victor 1999; 2001) The purpose of this technique is to uncover and create new insights by using a variety of LEGO materials (construction toy materials) as a language to think, speak, visualize, communicate, and understand business and managerial challenges. We used an application of this tool called “Real Time Strategy”. The experiments, carried out in a workshop format, had three basic phases: (1) Identity, (2) Landscape and Connections, and (3) Emergence and Simple Guiding Principles.⁴

Construction of identity: The first phase of the workshop exercises focuses on organizational identity. Participants are asked to use a wide assortment of LEGO materials to construct a representation of their organization. They are specifically tasked with representing not the physical facilities of their enterprise, but its essential characteristics, key functions, internal relationships, structures, most prominent features, central attributes, etc. This construction identifies how they as individuals understand their organization. After they have each constructed their representation, and discussed it with the other members of the group, they are asked to work together and collectively build a single, joint version. It often is constructed using one or more aspects of the organizational identity as it was represented in the individual versions.

Heeding the landscape and making connections: The second phase concerns the complexity of the organizational and business ‘landscape’ within which the organization operates. It focuses on factors that impact the success of the business, whether positively or negatively, directly or indirectly. Working individually, workshop participants construct small representations of separate, specific “agents”. Such “agents” are any factors which have an impact on the enterprise, from clients, to regulatory bodies, to competitors, to new technologies, etc. In discussion with one another, in which they edit out duplication and refine the representations, participants then jointly place these constructions around the organization’s identity in ways that show meaningful relationships to the enterprise. After this has been concluded, participants are asked to build representations of the many sorts of connections, influences, networks, interactions, etc. which link different parts of the representation they have built so far. By what they construct, they should also show some aspect of the relationship or connection which is important to it – i.e., a constraining relationship, a flexible one, a bridging one, etc.

⁴ Prior to these phases of the workshop, however, there is an extensive warm-up phase designed to help participants become familiar with the use of the materials, the role of the hand-mind connection, and the importance of metaphors and storytelling. These basics are necessary for the workshop to reach its intended outcomes.

Playing out emergence and identifying simple guiding principles: The final phase involves the development and exploration of a set of probable events which may emerge for the organization in its landscape here and now (“emergence”). Participants identify these probable events, and they are systematically discussed with respect to their implications for the organization. As part of the discussion of these examples of emergence, the “best” response for the enterprise, given landscape and a shared view of identity, is also decided on. Such responses, when they are consolidated into a larger pattern, provide the basis for identifying what are called “simple guiding principles” which provide direction for action. Simple guiding principles are local and contingent in application, and they call on individuals to reflect and interpret their actions strategically in light of the overall business identity and landscape.

FINDINGS

The data gathered in the three workshops supports our initial assumption that more personalized strategizing might increase commitment to strategy. We observed three first order phenomena in our experiments in personalized strategizing: *embodiment* of strategists in strategy, *vulnerability* of strategists, and *irreversibility*. We first elaborate on each of these findings, then discuss their significance for the issue of commitment to strategy.

Embodiment of Strategists in Strategy

The first finding was that *the strategy embodies the strategists*. In all three cases, the strategy became an expression of individuals’ personalities and emotions just as much as it displayed knowledge of the business:

The InterBlot group represented corporate HQ as an elephant. This allowed them to capture their emotions towards HQ: Strong, but sometimes too slow; friendly in general, but “dangerous if irritated”.

In the Hearsay workshop the group was looking to represent the members of the board. The different potential representations (“Should we use this animal head for XY?”) allowed them to make their attitudes more concrete.

The participants of the TinkerCorp workshop, when asked to build the identity of their firm, came up with a model that included themselves and everything around it. However, no real “issues” were visible and their business seemed very controllable. When asked to do it again, but this time really focusing on their individual views – “here and now” – of the company, they started modelling the flows of information inside the company and suddenly the model became messy and complex. They used different types of tubes and pathways to characterize different types of relationships and they used gate-like obstacles where they thought communication was hampered. One of the participants commented that this messiness was not necessarily bad: it was a truthful representation of their daily reality – “an open, living system” – and as such a better artifactual embodiment of it than an organizational chart.

The participants of the TinkerCorp group were also including themselves and their colleagues in the model; they were not talking about “the CEO” or “the Head of Production” but about “Earl” or “Alphonse”. They characterized their colleagues with attributes they thought fitted them. For instance, one was represented as a wizard, another one in a space suit. A participant, known to face many problems in his unit, was portrayed as surrounded by skeletons.

In all these examples, abstract factors became embodied in three-dimensional objects. Especially striking is how often individual emotions or perceptions were embodied in the constructions.

Vulnerability of Strategists

The second finding was that through putting themselves, their fears, hopes, and anxieties “out there”, the workshop participants made themselves vulnerable: Personalized strategizing lead them to disclose emotions and views – even “taboo” issues – that otherwise they might have kept to themselves. Vulnerability is a consequence of embodying those views and emotions in the constructions.

In the InterBlot workshop participants faced up to two major strategic challenges. The first one was the competition to their printing technology from a substitute product. The corporate InterBlot policy on this had become something of a dogma – it considered the substitute product a *nouveau riche* not worthy of too much attention. Challenging that dogma was taboo. Nevertheless, the participants suddenly addressed this issue: They represented their own organization as a castle with “strong walls” but “under attack” from more innovative competitors. To bring this point home, one participant took a big piece of LEGO and banged it against the supposedly solid walls of the castle. The substitute product he was insinuating cannot be kept outside by just making it a taboo topic, it will eventually break those walls.

The second threat was the retailers’s intention to bypass InterBlot’s old constituency, the printers. There was a shared feeling that InterBlot might not be in a position to prevent this from happening. Retailers, it appeared to the workshop participants were, at the same time, supporting and potentially upsetting their ways of doing business. This ambivalence was captured in the representation of retailers: A construction almost as big as the one representing InterBlot, with a friendly face on the front and a tiger crouching behind a wall.

In the representation of both threats, participants didn’t follow a conventional representational logic, namely that the strategy should not be affected by the strategist. Quite to the contrary, they made their fears, and even their *perplexity*, part of the artifact.

The Hearsay group represented their immediate boss as protecting an enclosed zone – their fool’s cage; the group was well aware that within the conventional firm matrix of the new owner they were somewhat unique and, for all that, their position all the more insecure. They depended to some degree on the patronage of their boss. To express this feelings of being potentially under threat, they built their Boss with two faces, a live one and a skull, “living Karl and dead Karl”. In this instance, a diffuse feeling of fear, that in a formalized strategy process might well have evaporated, was explicitly acknowledged by the whole group.

After building a representation of how they were linked to each other individually, the TinkerCorp group came to realize that not their nominal leader, but the supposed number two in the hierarchy was the one connected to everything and everybody. The number one in the group was forced to acknowledge that he was actually remote from anything but the computerized data system of the organization.

The TinkerCorp group represented their by far biggest client as an ever growing tower and a little figure facing it – the executive responsible for sales. This client was an important source of revenue for TinkerCorp, but because of that TinkerCorp was also dependant on it.

What made participants vulnerable is that they went beyond the familiar language of strategic analysis: instead of weaknesses or threats there were tigers and skulls; instead of arrows connecting boxes unobstructedly there were blocked communication pathways. The feelings of fear, insecurity, or perplexity underlying these images remained on the table even after they had been expressed. Participants were putting themselves “out there”, “on the line”, in a very literal sense.

This sort of vulnerability only seemed to happen in a conducive atmosphere. In all three cases we observed that there had to be an implicit *agreement to be vulnerable* – an “agreement” in a metaphorical sense, since this did not happen in a coordinated or conventionalized form.

Irreversibility

The third finding was that the implicit agreement to be vulnerable introduced an element of irreversibility into the strategy process. It is not in all cases easy to pinpoint exactly when the process became irreversible, but we observed that sooner or later the participants found themselves to be too personally involved to be able to disown what they had constructed.

The leader of the TinkerCorp group came up to one of the facilitators after the workshop and said: "Ghee, I thought I had it all figured out. I was going to send out his memo on strategy, but now I will have to completely rework it!" For him, the workshop, far from being a mere experiment, had lead him and his colleagues past a certain point from which there was no going back anymore – they had invested too much of their own personalities to just ignore what they found out.

The most dramatic demonstration of the process' irreversibility happened in the Hearsay workshop. At the end of day one, all participants had gotten comfortable expressing themselves by using LEGO materials and they shared a sense of accomplishment with regard to their representation of shared identity. A decisive moment had arisen earlier in the day when one of the participants was asking the group "What is passion? What is dynamism?" and answered himself by grabbing a chocolate bar and violently breaking it into pieces, then grabbing a coke bottle and shaking it up: "That is passion! That is dynamism!" This intervention stirred up the group and re-oriented the whole discussion about the identity of their strategy process. The broken chocolate bar and the coke bottle ended up as part of the elaborate LEGO representation of their organization, as wells fuelling the strategy process. More importantly, this incident led the group to a shared insight: In order to make the strategy effective, they had to focus on how to *involve* the new operating businesses in creating Hearsay's strategy rather than on how to *impose* on them a strategy that was conceived without them. This insight came to some of group almost like an epiphany. From then on, the discussion centered around issues of involvement.

At the beginning of day two, another person joined in who was known for favoring a top-down approach to strategy and had deliberately stayed away on day one. When one of the other participants explained the model to the new arrival, he sounded very awkward, as if reluctant to share what had become an intimate process for the participants. The newcomer interpreted this as a sign of irrelevance of what had been achieved before he joined in. With a deprecatory demeanour he immediately started to trash the new strategy process envisaged by the others. Strategy, he was arguing, had to be done by a team of experts, not by involving lots of operational managers, otherwise the process would be highly unproductive. He also used some of the vocabulary of the group in a derisive way - for example, the notion of "being a missionary of strategy" when going out to operational units in his mouth became the "missionary position". This neither caused any laughs nor complicit grins among the people from the original group. On the contrary, their body language indicated great discomfort.

The participants from day one had implicitly agreed to be vulnerable, to openly express themselves in new and possibly unprotected ways. Just how unprotected these expressions were, became clear through the sense of awkwardness that arose when the newcomer joined the conversation. Although he belonged to the group, he was not part of their experience of personalized strategizing. This led to an asymmetry in vulnerability. By not having been there when the agreement to be vulnerable happened, he hadn't made himself vulnerable, whereas the others had – to each other and to him. Only because of that, he was able to be so cynical and detached and also because of that, the others were *not* able to respond to it. From the moment they accepted to be vulnerable, what came out of the process (the construction) was so entrenched with their own personalities, that they could not disown it anymore.

The irreversibility of what had been discovered in the Hearsay workshop had a direct impact on the planned strategy process. One of the simple guiding principles the group came up with was "Be true to yourself". Since they arrived at this guiding principle through an intense examination of their current and aspired to identity, "Be true to yourself" ultimately meant "Be true to your

identity". Before the workshop, the strategy team was just about to initiate a big, three-phase strategic planning effort involving over 70 planners from the new international businesses and a budget of 750'000 US\$. After the workshop, they cancelled this process. After personally identifying themselves with an inclusive approach to strategizing they felt *the obligation* to include people other than the traditional strategic planners – for example, members of culture or branding teams. To them, this was being true to themselves.

Discussion

The phenomena we observed in personalized strategizing – embodiment, vulnerability, irreversibility – all bear on commitment as we have defined it earlier: An alignment with a purpose distinct from self-interest, sustained by emotional attachment or moral obligation. Moreover, these findings suggest a change in how we conceptualize commitment to strategy.

The observed agreement to be vulnerable is directly related to commitment, in fact there exists an isomorphism between the two. In speech act theory (Austin 1962; Searle 1969) commitment has been identified as an act, not just an utterance. People who make pledges, *do* something: they put themselves beyond a point of no return. Because they cannot act in the same way afterwards, pledging something is an act that changes their world. As we have demonstrated, the same seems to be true of the process of personalized strategizing. Agreeing to be vulnerable thus *is a commitment*.

Speech act theorists have identified a number of conditions that are necessary for a speech act to succeed, e.g. if we make a pledge we have to really intend to stick to it. Yet in many real-life situations, others may only much later or not at all be able to verify if we stuck to the pledge (the worry underlying agency theory.) In personalized strategizing, however, adherence or non-adherence to the agreement to be vulnerable, can be checked instantly, in real-time, so to speak. Because for all the implicitness of this agreement, participants have a very subtle sensorium for feeling if others are making themselves vulnerable in the same way. The incident with the new arrival in the Hearsay workshop very dramatically demonstrated the effect of asymmetries in vulnerability and the fragility of the process.

In the three LEGO Serious Play workshops we observed that participants did not simply jump into sensitive topics without an initial phase of hesitant observations which they hazarded to the group. In a series of gradual, tentative steps, participants offered cautiously phrased, preliminary observations, trying to limit or contain the amount of self-disclosure involved. Surprisingly quickly, though, they shared their genuine views, which in some cases were sensitive or "loaded", and hence, potentially dangerous. It was when they passed this moment, that the process became almost impossible to reverse. If, however, there would have been *no* willingness to be vulnerable, the processes could have been reversed or restarted at any point: What happened before would not have mattered.

Described as we have it so far, agreeing to be vulnerable is an act of *committing to the process* of personalized strategizing but it is also a first step towards *committing to the content* of personalized strategizing. This is where the phenomenon of embodiment comes in.

It has often been said, that managers should "embody the strategy", as way of saying they should internalize it and live by it. Personalized strategizing turns that phrase on its head by requiring that *first* the strategy embody the strategists. Our study shows that this is not just a gimmicky slogan, but a truthful characterization of personalized strategizing.

By embodying themselves in the artifact they produce, strategists make a commitment. In the case of Hearsay, when an outsider to the process joined, the participants felt so awkward because by then they had invested much of themselves in the construction. When it was ridiculed, *they* were ridiculed. By putting their mark on the construction, they had committed to it.

Embodiment and agreement to be vulnerable thus both bring in the aspect of publicity which we see as a necessary part of commitment. The literature on commitment to strategy, as we have seen, does not incorporate publicity because it equates commitment with goodwill (possibly stimulated by inclusion) or self-interest. By adding an element of moral obligation personalized strategizing subtly, but powerfully, changes the nature of commitment to strategy.

At the same time, personalized strategizing does also draw on the emotional dynamics of the strategy process, thereby connecting to and extending the practice of inclusive strategizing (as advocated by e.g. Oswald 1994, Mintzberg 1994, Westley 1990). Seeing their traces clearly visibly in the strategy artifact (in our study constructions using LEGO material) can fill strategists with a sense of pride and ownership and so further their attachment to it. Evidence of that was the reaction of one participant of the InterBlot workshop, who held up their existing 40 page-strategy document and remarked “Not in all these pages could I have conveyed the shared understanding of our business as we have built it here!”. And evidence *ex negativo* came from a member of the Hearsay group exclaiming at one point “If our strategy looks like our competitor’s – what’s the point?” – i.e. why should he care.

CONCLUSION

Our study contributes to the discourse on the generation of commitment to strategy by extending previous work by Mintzberg (1994), Kim and Mauborgne (1993), Wooldridge and Floyd (1990), Westley (1990) and others which makes a case for more inclusion and less formalism in the strategy process. We suggest that in addition to a change in strategy *process* we also need a change in strategy *content*.

Our initial assumption was that a *personalized* strategy content might generate more commitment. We staged three exploratory experiments in personalized strategizing, letting the strategists use a tool – LEGO Serious Play – that allows for, and even encourages, personalized expression. We found that in all three experiments strategists were *embodying* themselves in the strategy and making themselves *vulnerable*, which made the process *irreversible* – after a certain point, strategists couldn’t disown the strategy anymore. From this evidence we have argued that personalized strategizing, by its very nature, requires participants to take on a moral obligation but also engenders emotional attachment – both of which sustain commitment as we have defined it.

Our definition of commitment *per se* is another contribution of this paper. We believe that the popular definition by Porter *et al.* (1974) is not very useful because of its monolithic focus on the organization, making it unsuitable for researching commitment to anything else but “the organization”. Our definition, in contrast, is of commitment *per se*, so it could be used across a variety of foci, e.g. organizations, strategy process, or project teams.

A third contribution is a re-conceptualization of the very notion of *commitment to strategy*. The strategy literature has so far been content to equate commitment with goodwill or self-interest (partly due to the influence of Porter *et al.* 1974). Our definition of commitment *per se*, and by implication commitment to strategy, explicitly excludes self-interest. It retains the aspect of goodwill or emotional attachment, but extends the concept by adding an element of moral obligation. Contrary to much of strategy writing, it allows, and even demands, for managers to be seen as morally accountable actors.

The limitation of this work is that it doesn’t yet *prove* a link between personalization of strategy content and commitment. However, it offers preliminary evidence for *arguing* that there might be such a link and thus establishes a strong hypothesis: Personalization of content is an important factor in generating commitment to strategy. To validate this hypothesis and explore additional dimensions of personalized strategizing, a controlled, longitudinal study is needed. But, in any case, the preliminary evidence from this paper suggests that the personalization of strategy content might just be what is missing to make strategizing an activity fully worthy of commitment.

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