

Struggling over subjectivity: a critical discourse analysis of strategic development¹

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Introduction

Discursive perspectives provide opportunities to map out and critically examine some of the most fundamental questions in strategy and strategizing that are not easily approached with more traditional perspectives on Strategy as Practice (Hendry 2000; Knights and Morgan 1991; Seidl 2007; Vaara *et al.* 2004). This is the case with ‘subjectivity’, which can be understood as a discursively constructed sense of identity and social agency in specific contexts. In their seminal Foucauldian analysis, Knights and Morgan (1991) had already examined how strategy discourse can transform ‘individuals into subjects whose sense of meaning and reality becomes tied to their participation in the discourse and practice of strategy’ (p. 252). Thereafter, other discursive analyses have touched upon subjectivity. In particular, Samra-Fredericks (2005) has shown how organizational identities and power relations are constructed in strategy conversations. Mantere and Vaara (2008) have in turn demonstrated how different strategy discourses construct very different kinds of identities for organizational actors and consequently impede or promote participation. Nevertheless, empirical studies focusing on the discursive construction of subjectivity and its various implications in organizational strategizing are still rare in this area.

¹ A longer version of this chapter was initially published in *Human Relations* (Laine, P.-M. and Vaara, E. 2007. Struggling over subjectivity: A discursive analysis of strategic development in an engineering group. *Human Relations*, 60/1: 29–58). We have shortened the paper and updated parts of the theoretical discussion for this book chapter.

In this chapter, we wish to add to this research by examining subjectivity in strategy discourse from a discursive struggle perspective. We approach organizational discourse as a dialectical battle between competing groups (e.g. Mumby 2004). From a discourse struggle perspective, discourses have a great deal of power over individuals, but at the same time individuals can also draw from specific discourses for their own purposes. Central to this perspective is to view discourse and subjectivity as closely linked. On the one hand, specific discourses produce subject positions for the actors involved. On the other, actors employ specific discourses and resist others precisely to protect or enhance their social agency or identity.

We examine these discursive struggles in the context of an engineering and consulting group. Our analysis is based on extensive data, including interviews of people representing different positions in our case company, various kinds of documentary material and data gathered by participant observation. In this chapter, we report three examples of competing ways of making sense of and giving sense to strategic development, with specific subjectification tendencies. First, we show how corporate management can mobilize and appropriate a specific kind of strategy discourse to attempt to gain control of the organization, which tends to reproduce managerial hegemony but also trigger discursive and other forms of resistance. Second, we illustrate how middle managers can resist this hegemony by initiating unit-specific strategy discourses to create room for manoeuvre in controversial situations. Third, we show how project engineers can

distance themselves from management-initiated strategy discourses to maintain a viable identity in the midst of all kinds of pressures. Although our examples are case-specific, we believe that similar discursive dynamics also characterize strategizing in other organizations.

A discursive struggle perspective on subjectivity

Our analysis draws from the critical discourse studies tradition. This approach has grown out of the seminal work of Foucault (Foucault 1994) on the one hand and the development of specific methodologies in applied linguistics on the other (Fairclough and Wodak 1997; Wodak and Meyer 2002; Fairclough 2003). While many types of studies can be included under the broad umbrella of critical discourse studies, a general characteristic of such studies is to focus on the role played by language in the construction of power relationships and reproduction of domination. This is arguably a particularly suitable perspective for our analysis of subjectivity.

Critical discourse perspective has been put to use in various fields of human and social sciences, and the applications have differed significantly. In critical organizational discourse analysis (Fairclough 2005; Mumby 2004; Phillips and Hardy 2002; Thomas 2003), the role given to the social context has varied. In our analysis, we want to emphasize that one cannot understand specific texts and discourses without considering the social context in question. According to this view, discursive practices are among the most important social practices defining our social reality – and still overlooked in many areas such as mainstream strategy research. However, there are other important social practices, the role of which should not be underestimated. In strategizing, these range from routinized sense-making patterns and behaviours in organizational decision-making to explicit traditions and methods in organization-specific strategy processes (Jarzabkowski 2005). In fact, we argue that the role of specific discursive practices becomes salient precisely when they are linked with the other

social practices constituting strategy and strategizing in specific contexts.

Critical organizational discourse analyses have also varied in their orientation towards micro-level linguistic elements. Most of these analyses have focused less on the textual micro-elements and more on the linkages between discourse use and organizational action (Mumby 2004; Phillips and Hardy 2002). In our view, it is important to analyse textual elements in sufficient detail to understand their subtle effects on subjectivity (see also Fairclough 2005). However, the level of analysis must obviously depend on the research question and design. In this chapter, our focus is on the subjectification tendencies found in organizational actors' talk about strategy and strategizing in a specific organizational context. Here, we will focus on specific discursive processes and practices through which subjectivity is constructed and (re)constructed in organizational strategizing.

In any case, organizational discourses have ontological power; they define concepts, objects and subjectivities (Hardy and Phillips 2004). Most importantly for our purposes, discourses provide us with conceptual repertoires with which we can represent ourselves and others. These are subject positions that are available for people to occupy when they draw on these discourses, and these subject positions have fundamental implications for specific individuals. 'One's actions in the world as well as one's claim to "voice" depend upon how one is positioned within specific discourses' (Burr 1995, p. 141). The positions available within discourses bring with them what Davies and Harré (1990) refer to as a 'structure of rights'; they provide the possibilities for and the limitations on what we may or may not do and claim for ourselves within a particular discourse.

What is important in this kind of analysis is an explicit focus on the linkage of discourse and power in the organizational context. Following the example of Mumby (2004, 2005) and others (e.g. Thomas and Davies 2005), we approach this linkage as a dialectical battle between competing groups. This allows us to see how discourses define subjectivities, but also how the use of specific

discourses is part of the battle over power, hegemony and an individualized sense of identity. As Mumby puts it: 'Framed discursively, a dialectical analysis focuses less on identifying the meaning of particular discourses, and more on the interpretive struggle among discourses and practices. Analyses explore how social actors attempt to "fix" meanings in ways that resist and/or reproduce extant relations of power' (Mumby 2005, p. 24). These dialectics often involve a dynamic between control (using a specific discourse for means of control) and resistance (trying to cope with or directly resist specific discourses and their implications, e.g. on subjectivity).

For this purpose, we put forth the concept of 'discursive struggle' as a theoretical lens that helps to focus attention on the multiple and multi-faced discursive dialectics in strategy discourse. The point here is that these discursive struggles not only deal with competing views concerning organizational strategies, but also involve more fundamental questions related to the subjectivity of the actors involved. These include their rights and opportunities to engage in organizational decision-making, their autonomy as organizational actors and ultimately their identity as respected and important organizational members. This opens up a perspective that helps us to understand the inherent discursive politics involved in organizational strategizing. On the one hand, the mobilization of a specific discourse can serve as a means of managerial control. On the other, these discourses may be resisted precisely because they undermine the subjectivity of particular organizational actors. This resistance can take the form of open criticism, be shown in the ignoring of the hegemonic discourses or be manifested in alternative discursive articulations.

For an empirically grounded illustration of such dialectics, we now turn to our case analysis, where we examine the discursive construction of strategic development and its implications for subjectivity. Here, we will focus on the following empirical research questions: 'How do the actors discursively make sense of and give sense to "strategic development"?; and How do they construct specific subjectivities for themselves and others?'

The Elling Group as a site of discursive struggle

We focus on 'strategic development' in the Elling Group.² This case can be seen as a revealing example of how managers and organizational actors make sense of and give sense to 'strategic development' in very different ways. Here, we define 'strategic development' broadly, including all kinds of activities and processes related to the deliberate or emergent development of the business and organization. Consequently, we are not only dealing with the formal strategy process or on the official strategy rhetoric but also other talk around 'strategic development'. We focus on distinctive articulated ways of representing organizational reality, that is, 'discourses' in this organization. This definition of organizational discourses resonates with the view adopted by Watson: 'Discourse is a connected set of statements, concepts, terms and expressions which constitutes a way of talking or writing about a particular issue, thus framing the way people understand and act with respect to that issue' (Watson 1994, p. 133). The point is that these discourses are alternative and competing ways of socially constructing organizational reality around strategic development. They are also closely linked with other, more material organizational practices such as the financial control of specific units and customer projects as well as resource allocations for specific development activities.

Established in the 1950s, the Elling Group is an engineering and consulting group based in northern Europe. The company has a long tradition in providing extensive engineering projects for specific industries, typically involving the design and construction of new plants. It is considered to be the leading company in its sector globally, with a reputation for providing state-of-the-art technological solutions and professional expertise. From the perspective of the company, this has meant relying on the ability to manage technologically and organizationally complex customer projects. 'Competence,' 'efficiency' and 'quality' related to project work have been the cornerstones of the company's strategy.

² The names of our case company (Elling Group) and our case unit (Repco) are pseudonyms.

However, things have changed in recent years at both the customer end and internally. Technological development has changed working procedures and provided new alternatives for customer solutions. The investments made by the customers of the Elling Group have not increased as hoped for, which has reduced demand for the traditional services of the group. The competition has also increased. New competitors have entered the field and offered new alternatives for the customers. Local companies, which offer their services at a lower price, have also intensified competition.

The group has transformed itself into a multinational listed corporation. This has been shown in an accentuated emphasis on 'shareholder value'. Financial difficulties faced in recent years have further reinforced profitability concerns and resulted in streamlining and cost cuts. New demands coming from the customers and top management have intensified project work in most units of the corporation. For example, project schedules have been sharpened dramatically. At the same time, increasing efforts have been made to develop new products and services. This is also the case with the Repco unit that is the case-in-case unit that our analysis focuses on. Repco forms one important division of the group. It concentrates on specific kinds of engineering products and services that have traditionally been sold in extensive long-term projects.

In this situation, managers, project engineers and other key actors have actually shared rather similar views concerning the need to increase the profitability of the corporation as well as the necessity to develop their operations and services. Against this background, it has been surprising – and disappointing – to management that new strategic ideas such as 'value added services' have not taken off and that the personnel has not proved to be altogether committed to the strategic plans. This makes this case a particularly interesting one; it reveals that such problems are linked with fundamental concerns about subjectivity and power.

Methods

We have examined the 'strategic development' processes in this company by compiling several

kinds of empirical material on a longitudinal basis, focusing on the period 1998–2004. This includes participant observation, all kinds of company documents and targeted interviews. First, participant observation has been used. The first author has designed and carried out management training programmes for the company since autumn 1998. Altogether, 160 middle managers and other professionals have attended the thirteen-month programme, which has run eight times. Strategic development has been an essential part of these training programmes. The corporate management and the HR people have seen these programmes as important arenas to communicate the corporate strategy and to teach the new concepts and skills needed in strategic planning. In these programmes, the participants have, for example, prepared strategic plans for their own areas of responsibility. In these sessions, they have, together with the facilitators (including the first author), also reflected on the implementation of these plans as well as on how particular theoretical ideas have worked in practice. The sessions have provided numerous examples of concrete discursive struggles among the participants of these programmes. In addition, this training activity has led to invaluable informal contacts with the organizational members, helping us to map out typical patterns of discourse use in this organization.

Second, various kinds of documents concerning company strategy are another important source of empirical material. Many of these are publicly available, but they also include material that the first author has, with the approval of the case company, been able to gather during this research project. These documents have been especially important for us to be able to examine specific features of the 'official corporate strategy' and then to place the interviewees' comments about 'strategic development' against this background.

Third, material has been generated from semi-structured interviews with our case unit personnel by the first author of this chapter. These were conducted on a cross-sectional basis but focused on the changes taking place between 1998 and 2004. Altogether twenty people out of sixty working in the Repco unit were interviewed. The interviewed persons included the manager of the unit, five other

key persons that form the middle management of the unit, and sixteen project engineers. A ‘storytelling approach’ was followed in the interviews, placing a special emphasis on the interviewee’s own experiences. The idea was to let the interviewees talk as much and as freely as possible about ‘strategic development’ and their role in it. However, the interviews also included specific questions. These questions focused on their work, the corporate strategy, the strategy of the unit, the development work in the unit and the specific strategic activities in this unit and their experiences of all this. On average, the interviews lasted for two hours. They were all tape-recorded and fully transcribed.

All this provides an extensive discursive database for examining various discourses and discursive practices around ‘strategic development’. In particular, this data has allowed us to combine discursive material with ethnographic information, which is arguably a particularly fruitful starting point for analyses of strategy discourse (Samra-Fredericks 2004, 2005). Combining these data has not, however, been unproblematic. In particular, the interviews obviously reflect more of what is said in the interview situation rather than ‘naturally occurring talk’ in the organization more broadly. Nevertheless, precisely by comparing the observational, documentary and interview data we have been able to distinguish recurrent examples of discourse use, that is, instances that characterize the actors’ discourses more generally.

Critical discourse analysis is usually abductive, that is, ‘a constant movement back and forth between theory and empirical data is necessary’ (Wodak 2004, p. 200). This is also the case with our analysis. Our research design allowed us to contrast the corporate management strategy discourse with strategic development talk in the case unit, and these comparisons have been an essential part of the refinement of our theoretical ideas. At the first stage of our analysis, we focused on the overall differences in the corporate management, middle management and project engineer discourses on strategic development. We concentrated on typical features and patterns, but used specific examples to analyse particular discursive practices in more detail. These analyses focused on specific textual elements – e.g. recurrent concepts or metaphors – as

well as particular features in discourse use – e.g. rhetorical micro-strategies or modality shifts. This kind of analysis is not methodologically unproblematic as it involves a constant comparison of specific textual elements within a substantial textual database. In our case, the participant observation and the informal contacts with the company helped a great deal in placing specific texts in their wider social and intertextual contexts.

At the second stage, we then focused on discursive struggles over subjectivity. This proved to be a very complex research task, which in itself reflects the intricate linkages between strategy and subjectivity. In practice, we focused on specific examples highlighting the key hegemonic battle at play: corporate management control vs. organizational resistance. This does not, however, mean that all the discursive struggles would link with this conflict. Neither should this be interpreted as a sign of ever-present animosity between specific groups of people. Rather, this focus reflects our willingness to focus on and single out some of the most central discursive elements and patterns that characterize the discursive struggles at play in this organization. We examined numerous examples, from which we singled out typical and particularly telling illustrations of discourse use. Finally, we chose to focus on three central discursive patterns to be reported in this chapter, each of which is exemplified by illustrative texts.

Appropriation of strategy discourse to gain control

We begin by demonstrating how corporate management can mobilize and appropriate a ‘new strategy discourse’ and how this reproduces managerial hegemony to be resisted by others. While the group management had been working on ‘strategy’ and ‘strategic planning’ before, the corporate management focused its attention on ‘strategic’ issues in the aftermath of a market slowdown in 2001. A ‘new strategy discourse’ has thereafter been communicated through both formal (e.g. official presentations to internal audiences and external stakeholders, in-house-magazine, annual report) and informal (e.g. various kinds of meetings and

discussions) channels. This discourse has been a way for the corporate management to reorganize decision-making and planning processes (largely on the basis of traditional top-down approaches), to tackle the key challenges of the group (as they have seen them) and to promote the new objectives defined within this discourse (e.g. focus on 'value-added services' and 'consulting').

While this discourse has been promoted by various channels and taken various forms, we will here focus on specific examples from the in-house magazine and management training programme to highlight some of the most salient hegemonic elements in this discourse. This is how the new strategy was introduced in the in-house magazine:

The renewed strategy process was implemented with Consulting Company Ltd, making use of their strategy model. The objective was to introduce a new method for developing the Group's strategy for the period 2001–2005, and at the same time identify new business ideas. Hundreds of pages of bullet point presentations were generated in the course of the strategy process. The complete strategy documentation amounts to more than 100 pages. A condensed version of the strategy will be cascaded throughout the company in the form of presentations. Because of the confidential nature of the strategy documentation, it cannot be presented in detail in the In-House Magazine. Therefore this article is limited to presenting the mission slogan and the values in brief. The strategy will be cascaded throughout the Group to every employee. (In-house magazine 12/2001)

This is an informative example in several respects. First, through arranging objects such as 'strategy process', 'model', 'strategy documentation', 'new business ideas', 'mission slogan', 'values', and categories of social actors (top management, employees, the consulting company) the text reproduces a particular order seemingly controllable by top management. Second, the introduction of the new strategic planning model (as a progressive model of organizational decision-making) is legitimated in a particular way. This is done by reference to a well-known management consulting company ('Consulting Company Ltd'). Third, the emphasis on 'presentations' and 'documentation' underscores the planning-intensive nature

of strategizing. At the same time, it underscores the central role of those that supposedly have the best knowledge and are most capable of conducting such analyses and drawing conclusions, that is, the corporate management and the consultants. Fourth, there is also a strong emphasis on secrecy (e.g. 'confidential') which further underscores the role of corporate management as key strategists and the passive role ascribed to the organization. Fifth, the others are given a 'condensed' version of strategy. This means in effect that not many organizational members are given an opportunity to see the full document. The metaphoric expression of 'cascading' further positions the employees as passive recipients rather than active agents participating in the preparation of the strategy. In many senses, the corporate management's strategy discourse has thus drawn from traditional conceptions of 'strategic planning' (Ansoff 1965) characterized by a 'top-down' approach rather than more recent ideas about a 'bottom-up' approach (Floyd and Wooldridge 2000; Mintzberg and Waters 1985).

While the corporate management's strategy discourse has thus tended to undermine the possibility of others to participate in official strategic decision-making, its content has also had other problematic implications for the subjectivity of specific actors. In particular, the corporate management's strategy discourse has included elements attempting to limit the opportunities of specific actors to engage in development work. The following is an example of how 'innovation' has been linked with the strategy process:

Side by side with the strategy process, a separate innovation stream was pursued with the aim of creating new products and business ideas transcending the borders between business groups. Representatives of all business groups participated in this process. (In-house magazine, 12/2001)

This corporate discourse seems to paint a picture of organization-wide participation in corporated innovation processes. Within the corporate discourse, such innovations have, however, been primarily those that the corporate management has seen as 'value-added services' or 'consulting' rather than traditional project work. This has had a major impact on units that have traditionally

relied on project work, such as the Repco unit, not so much because of a disagreement concerning the need to develop new products and services but because of this self-declared right of corporate management to define and control what these products and services should be and how they should be developed.

Importantly, all this has happened in the context of increasing financial control which has itself been legitimated in the official strategy. In fact, the corporate management's strategy discourse has emphasized the need to focus on profitability not only in project work but also in the development of new products and services. The following is one of many examples of corporate management explaining this focus in a speech in the management training programme:

We [top management] can only anticipate the expectations of the clients and personnel. The only issue that we do not have to guess are the expectations of the owners. That we know; it is a fact. The owners want earnings per share. That means profitability and growth and above all no surprises. Whatever we say we better live with it. (President, 2004, participant observation)

This is a telling example in two senses. First, targets set by top management are legitimated by unambiguous references to 'owners'. Here, as well as elsewhere in strategic communication, the President draws from the powerful 'shareholder value' discourse and positions top management (personal pronoun 'we') as owners representatives with a particular organizational role and identity. The president emphasizes alignment with owners by presenting owners' expectations as a 'fact'. 'Clients' and 'personnel' are then portrayed in another manner: as actors whose expectations can only be 'anticipated'. The modalizing term 'only' provides an 'extreme case formulation' (e.g. Pomerantz 1986) that underscores the inability of top management to do anything else than to 'anticipate'. This means that there is little direct communication between management and clients or personnel. This prioritization of shareholders over 'clients' can, however, be seen as undermining the importance of customer contacts in project work, an issue that we will come back to in the following

sections. Second, 'no surprises' and 'we better live with it' invoke a patriarchal discourse where an intimidating father expects obedience from others (i.e. 'personnel') (e.g. Holmer-Nadesan 1996, pp. 53–56). Such limits are, however, something that the people in the Repco unit, emphasizing the need for continuous and somewhat unpredictable innovation processes, have found difficult to accept, as explained in the following sections.

With respect to corporate management, their strategy discourse has promoted their own status as strategists whose decisions and actions determine the future of the organization. At the same time, they have increasingly sought support from other people in their discourse. In fact, 'participation' has recently become a major topic of discussion in this group, too. This has typically involved the in-built distinction between 'strategy formulation' and 'strategy implementation'. For example, in an important presentation, the president emphasized that:

The definition of the strategy is relatively easy but the implementation is the hardest issue [...] The most important thing in strategy are actions. (President, management training programme, 2004, participant observation)

The point here is that this discourse can be seen as a plea for participation in 'implementation' – a classic challenge in strategic development in this as well as in other organizations. Such 'participation' has elsewhere been called 'participation by command' (e.g. Eriksson and Lehtimäki 1998, 2001). By using this vocabulary, the president has reproduced the traditional patriarchal view that it is the role of the corporate management to make the key decisions and then of other organizational members to 'implement' them, a worldview that has been difficult to accept by those who have valued the relative independence of project work and the ability to invest in development activities in these contexts.

In all, the launching of the new strategy discourse can be seen as an attempt to gain control over the organization. With this discourse, the corporate management has legitimated its authority position in the midst of uncertain market development, but at the same time undermined the agency and subjectivity

of others. This is a major reason for active or passive discursive resistance in the Repco unit as well as elsewhere, as discussed in the following sections.

Creation of room for manoeuvre

Next we turn to illustrate how middle managers have initiated their own strategy discourse to create room for manoeuvre in a situation where the corporate management's strategy discourse does not support their development activities. In our case, the manager of the Repco unit and his closest colleagues have approached strategic development in a way that differs radically from the conception of the corporate management. Their discourse has drawn from an entrepreneurial ethos, emphasized the need for local strategy work and underscored the importance of participation. Often, this discourse has also involved criticism of the corporate management's strategy in terms of both the objectives and the organization of the strategy process, but the managers have been cautious in terms of voicing this criticism vis-à-vis top management.

Characteristic of Repco management discourse is that concrete strategic development work has been seen as a key activity – regardless of whether it has been sanctioned by top management. In fact, in the interviews these people told how they had to start the work 'in secret', as in the following:

All of us were busy in the current customer projects and we did not have any spare time for development work. So we started conducting the new product development in secret. We were able to do this because we had financing from the National Technology Agency [because they did not receive resources from corporate management].

In this example, expressions like 'no spare time' and 'in secret' depict strategic development as hard and demanding work. Importantly, the key actors – that is the middle managers in the Repco unit – are portrayed in a heroifying light.

The following is then a typical example describing their view of the official strategy process led by corporate management:

The [corporate management] strategy does not disturb us [...] It's just fine if it doesn't go against

what we have thought [...] However, we must constantly, if not really confront, then convince management that we are doing the right things here.

What is central in this quote is the seemingly non-chalant approach to top management's strategy discourse. Corporate strategies are seen as 'not disturbing' and later the lack of contradiction is portrayed as 'just fine'. Both denial and diminishing are discursive practices that effectively create an impression that the interviewee would not care too much even if the strategies were contradictory. However, 'if not really confront' presupposes that they could also defend their ideas more aggressively, if needed. It is also clearly indicated ('constantly [...] convince management') that there is a need to remind the corporate management of specific ideas and needs. This is apparently required to secure the financing of their development work, but also something that they are willing to do. In this way, trying to influence the corporate management became an essential part of their strategy work.³

Overall, middle managers' view on strategizing has resembled a 'bottom-up' approach. An interviewee described this in an illuminating way:

This is like strategic control from the unit, and the [corporate] management has gradually become mature enough to understand these [their strategies].

Note how their approach to strategic development is coined in the interesting notion 'strategic control from the unit', underscoring the importance of local development work. The image built through this term is that the middle managers – rather than top management – are the progressive strategic entrepreneurs whose views and actions should be taken seriously. There is also a passing reference to the lack of 'maturity' in top management's strategic thinking, which delegitimizes and undermines the importance of the official strategy discourse.

³ Importantly, the Repco management has lately succeeded in 'getting its message heard' at the corporate management level. This has also led to material consequences, and the Repco management has obtained more time and money for development work. In the unit, this has reinforced the belief in their own approach to strategy.

The unit management has worked hard to make all the people within the unit and also others in specific units participate in coordinated strategic development work. 'Participation' has also become a central theme emphasized in their unit – as well as in the interviews. This is how the head of the unit summarized their approach:

I began to arrange this kind of meetings in our unit [...] So that we could figure out together what kind of competence is needed in the future [...] then we had workshops of this kind for the whole unit [...] and then we have had personal discussions. I want to hear it from everybody personally what kind of issues they are interested in and what kind of personal development challenges they would be ready to take. It's not right that I just order people to do something. The awakening has to happen individually.

As is evident, this participation differs radically from the corporate management 'participation by command' mode (see the previous section). Notions such as 'figure out together', 'workshops', and 'for the whole unit' construct a collective approach to strategizing. This collective subjectivity is, however, also linked with the individual level as in 'personal discussions' and 'personal development'. 'It's not right that I just order people to do something' includes a presupposition that the head of the unit could exercise his hierarchical power in strategizing, but is not willing to do that in the name of participation. Interestingly, the Repco management discourse has at times included religious elements (e.g. 'awakening' above). The following is another typical example:

It has been kind of an enlightenment that we do not speak about projects in my unit anymore; we talk about the lifecycle of the plant [...] We have tried to spread this to the shop floor level [...] There are sixty of us, and ten have been awakened so there are fifty that have to be awakened [...] We have now started to spread the gospel.

These biblical metaphors ('enlightenment', 'awakening', 'gospel') are clear examples of the strong sense of community among these key people. At the same time, such expressions tend to reinforce a particular kind of power relationship between the management of the Repco unit and the project

engineers. In fact, the subjectivity constructed for the key managers at Repco paradoxically resembles that of top management, whose approach they are keen to criticize. Note how the metaphor of 'spreading the gospel' also distinguishes between 'true believers' and those who have to be 'awakened'. This is an important distinction that reflects the challenge of Repco management vis-à-vis the project engineers, many of whom do not seem to be easily 'awakened'. This is an issue which we will examine in more detail in the following section.

In all, while this Repco discourse reflects specific convictions concerning the corporate strategies and the appropriate organization of strategy processes, it can and must also be seen as a means to resist corporate management hegemony. In fact, the discourse of the unit manager and his colleagues has served as a basis for autonomous strategic development work and the legitimization of actions that have not been supported within the framework of the corporate management discourse.

Distancing to maintain viable identity

In our third example, we illustrate how specific engineers can distance themselves from management-initiated strategy discourses to maintain viable professional identity in the midst of increasing pressures. For these people, the development work conducted in the context of the projects is the key strategic activity in the organization. The corporate management's approach to strategy has been seen as superficial but also problematic, as it has tended to undermine their professional identity and reduce their ability to develop new products and services in the project context. Neither has the Repco unit management's call for participative unit-specific strategic development gathered much support, because it has been seen as far removed from the actual challenges of project work.

The project engineers have themselves emphasized the role of root-level development work within the projects, as in the following example:

In that project I had to create a procedure for an XYZ system. I was the first one to do that in our company and had to dig up [information] from a

number of places. We also have experts within this field, and I had to interview a lot to put it together. People later asked me to provide them with this procedure [...] I am not saying this to stress my own importance but to emphasize our way of working.

In such examples, the interviewees have described how the project engineers confront new situations, and how these challenges can be tackled by hard work (e.g. 'dig up', 'interview a lot to put it together'). This is a typical example in terms of the pronounced individualism involved (e.g. with the personal pronouns). These and other expressions also reproduce a masculine identity linked with this male-dominated engineering profession. Importantly, in these examples as in numerous others, the focus is on development work conducted in the project context, to underscore the difference from the corporate management or Repco unit discourse, which focus on the need for separate strategic planning sessions and development projects.

The project engineers have emphasized the role of 'experience' in strategic development. The following is a typical example from an interview:

As a matter of fact, the customer trusted us so much that during the project we sat down together and he asked us to handle this new issue that had emerged from the EU directive, so that he doesn't have to worry and start asking somewhere else [...] It was new to us to provide a total solution for this particular area [...] We had this one guy, Howard, who had done parts of it within one previous project [...] and now Howard was given the task of figuring out what we should do [...] So it was Howard who developed this solution [...] and he did this development work within a customer project [...] and this was the beginning of a new competence area within the project work.

Here, the interviewee constructs the project engineers as 'trusted partners' for the customers with impressions like 'customer trusted us', 'we sat down together', and 'he asked us to handle this [...] so that he doesn't have to worry'. The point is that it is the seasoned project engineer who is in the unique position of being able to engage in a dialogue with the customer. Experience comes in both as a basis of trust and as capability to solve the problems. By these and other similar references to

'experience', 'customer contacts', 'knowledge' and 'capability', the project engineers have legitimated their position as central actors with respect to strategic development. Such examples have also (re)constructed images of heroism, related to the difficult technological and financial challenges. This heroism has been further accentuated by the lack of support given by management and the increasing cost pressures. Through this kind of discourse they have thus (re)produced a positive self-image in the midst of all kinds of changes.

In their discourse, the project engineers have often questioned the rationality of top management's strategy discourse. The following is a typical example criticizing the focus on 'value-added services' or 'consulting':

In my view our [the company's] problem is that there is no understanding [...] if you look at the annual report or what the President says, it is consulting [...] but if you ask the customer, it is our strength that we can take care of large projects and see them through as scheduled.

Within the project engineers' discourse, any attempts to redefine their role as trusted partners of the customers have been seen as threatening. This is exemplified by a vivid comment by a seasoned project engineer who was horrified with the image of becoming a 'consultant':

The consultants piss me off [...] I have seen consultants there. They drink coffee in the meetings. They are nice guys, but they don't know anything. I haven't got the slightest idea what they are doing. But if the customer pays for it, why not? And obviously we [the group] are also going to that direction. We don't develop people to become project professionals. Instead we develop 'presentation skills'. We must be able to speak for more hours with less knowledge. But in my opinion, if you know your subject, you can convince people without any particular presentation skills.

With the personal pronoun 'they' the interviewee distances consultants from 'himself' ('I') and 'us' ('we'). By using the present tense form he translates his situational experience of consultants to consultant practice. By defining consultants as 'being' he invokes a subjectivity of 'performer' to project engineers. He attributes skills like

‘speaking’ and ‘presenting’ to consultants but does not count those skills as part of ‘knowing your subject’. He uses a masculine metaphor ‘piss me off’ and irony like ‘nice guys, but they don’t know anything’ to underscore the difference between experienced project professionals (who can genuinely help the customer) and consultants (who are seen as mere actors without any valuable skills). On the whole, these reflections manifest typical ways in which project engineers have resisted the ‘castrating’ effects of the official strategy discourse.

Characteristic of the project engineers’ discourse has indeed been a very critical view on the corporate management’s overall approach to strategy process which was often seen as ‘empty rhetoric’, as exemplified in the following:

I have seen the fine-looking green book that they have waved around, and there are these fancy posters on the wall.

I wonder if they [the corporate management] have themselves understood what they say with their circles.

Note how in the first quotation the references to ‘fine-looking green book’ and ‘fancy posters on the wall’ are effective means of distancing, and how the imagery of ‘waving around’ categorizes the official strategy work as unimportant. Questioning the competence of top managers in the second quotation is then a straightforward example of the trivialization and delegitimation of official strategy work. Such criticism has served an important purpose for the reconstruction of the positive self-image of the project engineers. However, it has rarely been voiced outside the project engineers’ own spheres.

These project engineers have also tended to dismiss the bottom-up development work in Repco. Although they have acknowledged the efforts made to secure the future of the unit, they have on the whole been sceptical of the new plans developed by the Repco management. In fact, their strategic development activities have often been constructed as ‘pottering about’, with little possibility of having a real impact on key decisions. At worst, the unit manager and his collaborators have been portrayed more as ‘clowns than real managers; if they

resist top management, they will be transferred to other positions’.

In all, it is important to note that the project engineers’ discourse is not only an expression of deviant opinions about the corporate objectives or about organizational decision-making processes, but also a means of resisting managerial hegemony. By reverting to their discourse, the project professionals have attempted to protect their professional identity and autonomy – and partially succeed in doing this. Namely, by not surrendering to the strategy discourse of the corporate or unit management, they have limited the ability of the management to control the actual project work – discursively and otherwise.

Discussion

In our empirical analysis, we have focused on two interrelated questions: ‘How do the actors discursively make sense of and give sense to “strategic development”?’ and thus ‘How do they construct specific subjectivities for themselves and others?’ We need to emphasize that we can only offer glimpses of the myriad of discursive processes and practices involved in the Elling Group. What we have reported here are specific examples of competing ways of making sense of and giving sense to ‘strategic development’, with particular implications for subjectivity. First, we have illustrated how the introduction of a new official strategy by corporate management can be seen as an attempt to gain control of the organization. While the exact features may vary greatly from case to case, such appropriation of strategy discourse by top management is likely to be very common in contemporary organizations. In fact, this is probably one of the most typical ways in which hierarchical power relationships are re-established with respect to decision-making in contemporary corporations. In this case, it involved the reproduction of traditional strategy discourse with its top-down conceptions of strategy work. In many ways, this discourse was instrumental in legitimating top management-led change initiatives, but at the same time involved such hegemonic tendencies that many other organizational members could not but resist. This is a

major reason for why the new corporate management discourse never fully 'took' in the organization. Our point here is that this is not uncommon but very typical; attempts to gain control are bound to trigger acts of resistance of various kind. Discursively, this resistance often means invoking alternative discourses.

Second, we have shown how middle managers can initiate unit-specific strategy discourse to create room for manoeuvre in situations where their development activities are not supported by the corporate management's strategy discourse. Their own entrepreneurial discourse emerged as an alternative that helped to resist the hegemonic discourse of the corporate management and re-establish the subjectivity of these middle managers as 'strategic actors'. In particular, this discourse provided a means to legitimate specific actions that seemed to contradict the official strategy discourse of the corporate management. What is particularly interesting in this case is how legitimacy was sought by referring to 'pioneering' or 'more progressive' approaches than those of the corporate management. While our case unit can be described as a particularly active one, we argue that these kinds of discourses, which provide alternatives to the official strategy, are likely to be found in most other corporations as well.

Third, we have illustrated how project engineers can distance themselves from management-initiated strategy discourses to maintain viable identity in the midst of difficult changes. In this case, the subjectivity constructed in management-led strategy discourses seemed particularly threatening for their professional identity as competent project leaders. In this situation, their own strategic development discourse was an interesting mixture of the traditional project-based discourse of the company and a sceptical attitude towards the new strategy initiatives of the corporate or middle managers. When legitimating their traditional role as key people in business development, they frequently referred to 'customer needs' and 'experience', thereby focusing attention on the concrete business operations instead of 'abstract strategy rhetoric'. Again, such resistance by specific worker groups is likely to characterize many contemporary organizations. This has already been shown in other

contexts (Contu and Willmott 2003; Doolin 2002; Ezzamel *et al.* 2001; Holmer-Nadesan 1996).

It must be emphasized that these dialectics of control and resistance are not merely abstract instances of organizational rhetoric, but closely linked with the social context and the material conditions at hand. These specific discourses reflect the specific social positions and concrete challenges of the actors involved. They are in the end not too surprising, either; rather, they mirror the age-old tension between top-driven control on the one hand and the right for self-determination and self-realization on the other. This does not, however, undermine the constitutive effects of such organizational discourses. On the contrary, as this case vividly illustrates, traditional strategy discourses tend to privilege top managerial decision-makers and limit the opportunities of others to fully participate in organizational strategizing. This frequently reproduces the classical confrontation between the top and lower levels of organizational hierarchy.

It is also important to underline that not all discursive action is fully conscious or intentional. This means that specific discourses can be reproduced almost automatically without a complete understanding of their implications. In this sense, top managers and other organizational actors can easily remain 'prisoners' of the established discourses and other social practices such as 'top-down approaches' or 'participation by command'. In fact, it is probably often the case that top management are not fully aware of the problematic disempowering effects of their strategy discourse, especially as these are often conveyed through subtle discursive practices. Hence, as illustrated by this case, overt or covert resistance to a new official strategy discourse may often come as a surprise to top management.

Finally, this kind of analysis also helps us to deepen our understanding of the role of other organizational members in discursive strategizing. Their role is easily reduced to responsiveness/non-responsiveness: 'consent' or 'resistance' without taking into account the generative power of their discourse. In particular, this case highlights the crucial role of middle managers. Rather than being mere 'translators' of corporate strategies (e.g. Floyd and Wooldridge 2000), they can act as

agents creating new discursive and social practices for unit-specific needs. They are thus central political actors whose discursive and other actions play an important role in organizational strategizing (see also Balogun and Johnson 2005; Brown and Humphreys 2003; Rouleau 2005). At another level, the project professionals' discourse is an essential vehicle through which they can not only work for or against specific managerial agendas but also promote specific ideas that they consider important. This analysis thus helps to better understand the overwhelming discursive complexity in organizational strategizing that should not be underestimated in any analysis of organizational strategy processes.

Conclusion

The starting point of this chapter has been to focus on the discursive construction of subjectivity, which is a topic that deserves a great deal of attention if we want to better understand the underlying socio-political dynamics in organizational strategizing. This is a major challenge, especially for the Strategy as Practice stream of research that seeks to add to our knowledge of the social and hence also discursive processes constituting strategy, strategizing and strategists in specific settings. In our view, this analysis makes two specific contributions to the Strategy as Practice literature. First, we think that the chapter makes a contribution in outlining the discursive struggle perspective on subjectivity. In our analysis, we have drawn from the seminal work of Knights and Morgan (1991) on the linkage between strategy and subjectivity. However, we have tried to further develop this approach so that we can better understand the ways in which subjectivities are constructed and reconstructed in organizational strategizing. We have done this by introducing the discursive struggle perspective that has been applied in other organizational contexts (e.g. Mumby 2004) but not really used in the strategy domain. This is an interesting and useful perspective as it helps us to focus on the constant dialectics of control and resistance in organizational strategizing and thereby better comprehend how organizational strategizing links with broader

issues of hegemony and resistance. In our analysis, we have reported three examples of how organizational actors make sense of and give sense to 'strategic development', with fundamental implications for agency and identity. These examples manifest three specific but typical ways in which organizational actors mobilize discourses in struggles over subjectivity: the launching and appropriation of strategy discourse by top management in an attempt to gain control over the organization, the initiation of an alternative strategy discourse to resist top managerial hegemony and to create room for manoeuvre by specific unit managers, and distancing from management-led strategy discourses to maintain viable identity at the project engineer level. Although our examples most certainly have unique features, we believe that they illustrate more general discursive patterns that can be found in many contemporary organizations.

Second, this kind of view on strategic development discourses also provides additional explanations to why some of the strategic ideas do not 'take' (Hardy *et al.* 2000), lead to 'failures in strategizing' (Maitlis and Lawrence 2003) or have 'unintended consequences' (Balogun and Johnson 2005). In this sense, our analysis contributes both to more socially (Balogun and Johnson 2004, 2005; Floyd and Wooldridge 2000) and discursively oriented analyses (Hardy *et al.* 2000; Maitlis and Lawrence 2003) examining 'misunderstandings', 'communication problems' or 'lack of commitment' in strategy processes. In simple terms, our analysis shows how the reasons for such problematic experiences do not only lie in opposing views concerning the strategic direction of the organization but also involve very different ideas concerning what 'strategic development' or 'strategizing' should be all about (see also Mantere and Vaara 2008). Central here is the role and identity given to specific actors. In brief, most people want to see and portray themselves as 'strategic actors', and efforts – intentional or unintentional – to limit this role are likely to confront discursive and other social resistance.

While our study has pointed to specific discursive dynamics, there are many issues that will require closer scrutiny in future studies. In particular, there is a need for closer analyses of alternative

and competing strategy discourses in different settings. In this chapter, we have sketched some ideas about how the 'official' corporate strategy, middle managers' views on strategy and the discourse of specific professionals are linked together. Future studies could go much further in this direction, for example, by examining various kinds of encounters with methods such as conversation analysis (Samra-Fredericks 2004, 2005). It would also be important to continue to examine the various subtle means through which subjectivities and organizational power relationships are discursively constructed in specific texts. Such analyses could in turn draw from more linguistically oriented discourse analysis (Kuronen *et al.* 2005). It would also be interesting to see to what extent the legitimacy of specific discourses comes from their widespread use, for example, in the media. A more fundamental issue for future research is then what is defined as 'strategic' in the first place and by whom (see also Clegg *et al.* 2004; Carter *et al.* 2008). In our case, the project engineers' work can be seen as 'strategic' in the sense that their practices were crucial in constituting the actual emergent strategy of the organization (Mintzberg and Waters 1985) and its competitive advantage. How some activities and practices are labelled or defined as 'strategic' or 'non-strategic' in strategy literature and actual organizations requires specific attention in future studies.

Finally, there are also practical implications that should be taken seriously. First and foremost, this analysis illustrates the central role that discourses play in organizational strategizing. The main point is not to dismiss the role of discourses as mere 'communication' but to understand that the very act of talking about strategy involves important implications in terms of the role and identity given or not given to specific actors. This should lead to sensitivity when it comes to organizational strategizing and the design and organization of specific strategy processes. Second, this analysis shows that hegemonic and non-participative approaches rarely lead to the enthusiasm and commitment called for in the 'implementation' of specific strategies but rather tend to result in resistance in different forms. This is not a surprising finding per se, but this analysis should help to understand some

of the underlying reasons that relate to fundamental questions concerning the agency and identity of specific organizational members. Third, this analysis also illustrates that all actors are easily bound by existing discourses – traditional ways of approaching strategy. This is a serious problem as far as it means – as it often does – precisely the reproduction of hegemonic and non-participatory approaches. Therefore, there are good reasons for all involved in strategizing to attempt to go beyond the traditional top-down approaches and to actively search for ways to encourage participation – even in situations where the interests of particular actors may seem contradictory. This can be seen as a specific challenge for strategy experts – including all involved in the Strategy as Practice community.

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